

Facing Fears

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Category: Buffy: The Vampire Slayer

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-04-27 08:00:00

Updated: 2000-04-27 08:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 15:34:35

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 48,392

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Buffy's been dumped and three different men plan to take advantage, Riley, Parker and the newly-reborn Master. Meanwhile, Gabriel is targeted by the Initiative.

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>Author's note: The character of Gabriel Giles was introduced in a previous story I wrote entitled "Divergent Paths". This story is a direct sequel to "History".

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>Special thanks to Christie and Lady Q whose feedback helped kick this labor on into a final product.

>* * *

>Michael Czajak closed his eyes and breathed deeply, searching for the inner calm that he would need to cast the complicated spell. He sat cross-legged on the dirty, ash-strewn floor of the burnt-out Sunnydale High School, the shattered bones he had found in Restfield Cemetery laid out before him. The pieces had been arranged in the shape of a man and the skull had been painstakingly reconstructed using an old gypsy recipe for a glue-like paste made from powdered bone. Aside from a few chips where the missing fragments could not be recovered, the vampire's skull looked to be in perfect shape.

Everything was in place.

>The power of the Hellmouth was strong here above the cavernous, glowing cleft in the rock bed. It emanated from deep within the earth, waiting for him to tap into it. All he had to do was open himself up and accept it. But he was afraid. Nothing he did ever worked out right. His whole life had consisted of a long string of failures, interspersed with periods of abuse by those who would oppress people weaker than themselves. What was going to be different about this time?

>The complexity of the spell he was about to attempt was far beyond anything he had ever tried before. Under normal circumstances, he

wouldn't even have considered it, but he had no choice.
 >The incantation had first come to him in a dream, filtering into his subconscious on the tones of an insinuating voice. His fear and lack of confidence had bade him to ignore it and, for a time, he had. But the relentless dream kept coming, eventually spilling over into his waking hours too, until he was sure it would drive him insane unless he complied with it.

>The voice seemed to know how to manipulate him, speaking to him on a basic level, feeding his emotions and overpowering his meager will. Desire. He worshipped the ideal of Willow Rosenberg, imagining her to be his perfect match, and obsessed over ways to win her heart. Rage. He had been duped by a vampire who had used him for his magic and then abandoned him. Fear. He was afraid of failing, of reaffirming the belief that he was as worthless as he had always been told.

>So he had delved into the depths of the ruined high school, seeking out the source of an unidentified power. The sound of the voice in his head had receded into an insistent whisper, but continued to push him.

>With a shuddering sigh, he resigned himself to going through with the ritual. Dread filled him. In the event of failure, death was certainly a possibility, but with witchcraft, worse things could happen. But Michael wasn't really sure if his life could actually get any worse than it already was.

>Pressing his palms tightly together, he began to recite the words to the incantation. They flowed effortlessly from his lips, having been burned into his memory by the ruthless dream voice. As the spell took shape, the raw power flow emanating from the rift shifted, bending and channeling itself through him.

>Michael gritted his teeth as the energy shook through every muscle in his body, permeating every pore and cell, rattling his bones and cramping his skinny limbs with pain. He struggled to recite the rest of the spell, spitting the last few syllables out between clenched teeth and gasping breaths.

>An impact like nothing he had ever felt before smashed into his brain, knocking his tortured body prone to the stone floor where he twitched and groaned, his eyes rolling up white inside his skull.

>He screamed as cold, intelligent blackness rose up and filled his mind, consuming him, sublimating and smothering his very identity to make room for itself. It was evil, pure and deadly, a centuries old sentience that had clung to this world tenuously by strength of will alone. Michael fought back out of pure instinct, desperate to retain some small shred of himself. The darkness relented, settling and meshing with his brain so perfectly that it was no longer possible to determine where one mind stopped and the other one began.

>Michael sat up slowly, feeling centuries of arcane knowledge flood through him as well as a vague presence that hovered around the edges of his mind. The dream voice spoke again and, this time, he knew that its source had become an irrevocable part of him. The voice was now his own.

>*You are my minion now.* it thrummed inside him, *As I am your Master. Together we will wreak vengeance on those who have wronged us.*

>He remembered an entirely new life now, as if it had been his own, one where he had been a vampire destroyed two-and-a-half years ago by a hated enemy. And now he was alive again. A vision flickered through his senses, the image of a blonde girl battling a group of vampires with amazing skill and relentless tenacity. Michael knew her from

school, Buffy Summers, but now he knew of an entirely new side of her. She was also called the Slayer by some and the voice in his head demanded her death.

>Michael raised his arms and shouted exultantly, reveling in a wealth of newfound power. The presence continued to mesh itself with him, filtering down into the deepest levels of his being and filling him with strength. The dream voice sang to him, a single relentless note like an endless shriek of demand inside his head. Vengeance. But vengeance would take time to execute properly and Michael wanted to test the limits of his new abilities first.

>He stood and hefted the vampire's skull in his hand with a cruel smile, the rest of the bones having been consumed by the spell. Patience would not be so difficult. He had waited almost three years. A little more time he could manage.

>* * *

>Buffy sat at a round table at the Bronze, waiting and drumming her fingers on the hard tabletop. She was supposed to be meeting someone, but she had no idea who. The person was obviously late. All around her, young, provocatively-garbed people milled about lethargically, even the ones on the dance floor showed a marked lack of verve.

>A tall waiter impatiently cleared his throat, standing just outside her immediate vision. She turned in her chair and found Giles wearing a burgundy busboy's vest and a black bowtie and holding an empty tray, tapping his foot expectantly while watching her with a tired stare.

>"Come on then, what d'you want?" he prodded irritably with a pen poised over a small note pad on the tray.

>She blinked and he was suddenly dressed in a worn, black leather jacket and jeans, his glasses gone, similar to how he had looked during his 'Ripper' phase. He put his tray and pen aside and she hesitated, watching him in bewilderment as he pinned a cigarette between his lips and lit it, one-handed.

>"Giles, I-" she began.

>"Forget it," he cut her off, withdrawing the cigarette from his mouth and spewing a stream of smoke at her, "You had your chance. I can't wait all day."

>Turning away, he melded into the crowd, quickly losing himself amongst the throng of young people.

>"Wait!" she reached out to stop him, but it was too late.

>Slipping off her seat, Buffy quickly moved to follow him. Wedging into the press, she squeezed through a tight spot and pushed through to the other side, coming face to face with Willow and almost colliding with her.

>The redhead's face was pale and she regarded Buffy tensely, her coffee-brown eyes filled with fear.

>"Hurry!" she cried on the edge of tears, taking her friend by the arms.

>Buffy tried to calm her down, "What? Willow, what's wrong?"

>"Vampire!" she took hold of Buffy's wrist and led her around until she was facing a tall, still figure propped against the wall.

>It was Spike, immobilized within the confines of a full body cast. Only his face, the tips of his fingers and his toes poked through the white plaster. Reaching desperately with his lips, he stretched futilely for a bendable straw sticking out of a glass of thick, crimson liquid.

>"What are you waiting for?!" Willow demanded, jabbing a finger in

the vampire's direction, "Stake him!"

>Buffy obediently withdrew a wooden stake from her purse and advanced on him. Spike abandoned his drink and squirmed uselessly in the cast, his wide eyes locked on her. Raising her weapon to strike, she froze, sensing danger.

>Cool wind washed over her from behind and a heavy weight fell on her back. Instinctively, she gripped her attacker and flipped it over her shoulder and onto the ground. The vampire had only a moment to protest before her stake found its heart.

>Straightening, she found herself outside, in the middle of a garbage-strewn alley. Vampires were closing on her from all sides and she was utterly alone. As one, they swarmed her and she was hard-pressed to defend herself.

>A tall, thick-limbed vampire struck out at her and she ducked aside, grabbing its wrist and snapping a straight-legged kick up into its chin. Before it even hit the ground, she snapped the kick out sideways and drove her heel into another's midsection. They surrounded her, pressing the attack endlessly and driving her to the limits of her abilities. As the time between individual attacks grew shorter, it seemed like her opponents were melding into one blindingly fast fighter.

>Strong, swift hands struck out at her in rapid succession, rocketing for her face and throat. Acting without conscious thought, she whipped her arms around in tight, defensive circles, knocking the attacks aside. A heavy boot slipped past one of her blocking arms and slammed into her stomach, driving the air painfully from her lungs.

>Her enemy struck her under the chin and seized her by the throat, jerking her body up straight. Her face tight with pain, she glared at the vampire and threw her stake arm forward.

>"Angel?!" she gasped, stopping her hand just short of his heart.

>He smiled, a rare expression that she had once considered to be hers alone, and dropped his hands from her throat to mesh his fingers through hers. He was outfitted in a tuxedo now and she was wearing her prom dress, following him in smooth graceful circles around the Sunnydale High gym. Crepe-paper decorations festooned the walls and a glittering mirror ball hung from the ceiling, scattering tiny motes of reflected light around the room.

>"You need help." He told her calmly, keeping in perfect step, "He's coming."

>"What?" she looked up into his deep, dark eyes in confusion, "Who's coming?"

>He shook his head sadly, "He knows you're weakened. They all do. Be careful."

>Lifting her arm up high, he turned her skillfully around. As the room spun, it shifted into a foggy, moonlit graveyard. Angel was gone and she was standing under the twisted branches of a tall, gnarled tree, bathed in pale moonlight. Soft footsteps crunched through the stiff grass, approaching, and she backed away, the comforting hardness of a stake in her hand.

>Instead of touching the tree, her back pressed into the warmth of a firm yet yielding body. Whirling, she came face to face with a tall, auburn-haired young man with vibrant green eyes limned with a halo of gold around the pupils. Smiling warmly, he wrapped his arms around her in a tender embrace. Gabriel.

>Inhaling deeply, she slipped her hands up along his solid muscles and pressed her face into his neck. Her fingers brushed something odd jutting from his back, out of place. A pair of shiny, black-feathered wings stretched outward from his shoulders like an angel and wrapped

around, enfolding them both like an impossibly soft, tickling shelter. Gabriel cupped her face in his hands and tilted her head back, gazing lovingly into her eyes and smiling before gently lowering his mouth onto hers.

>"What are you afraid of?" he brushed his lips across her ear, taking the soft lobe tenderly between his teeth.

>Her answer came as a breathy sigh of pleasure.

>They sank down to the flat, grassy earth, passionately twining their limbs around one another and kissing deeply. Buffy flipped him over and climbed on top of him, feeling a wall of warmth spring up between them. His strong hands pressed her against him and she continued to roll onto her back. The heat was becoming stronger, more intense, almost uncomfortable. They rolled back again and the sensation escalated further, crossing the border from enticing pleasure into burning pain.

>Bright orange flames sprang up all over Gabriel's body and he shook and screamed in a voice that was not quite his own. She selflessly covered him with herself, slapping desperately at his clothes to smother the fire but the blaze only flared hotter.

>He gazed at her with hurt, tear-filled eyes as the flames consumed him and his mouth opened in despair.

>"Buffy . . ." He tensed sharply and gritted his teeth in pain, his form shifting under her, becoming instantly dark and sinister.

>The fire died immediately and Gabriel's head became pale and hairless, his nose turning up into a flat bat-like feature and a permanent rosy stain asserting itself around his mouth and chin.

>She was suddenly standing again, before a pool of murky water in the natural underground cavern that extended beneath the Hellmouth. The Master pinned her arms to her sides in a steely grip from behind and cut into the tender flesh of her throat with sharp teeth. The world went dark and the pool of water came hurtling up to collide with her face and engulf her.

>Buffy jolted awake, her eyes snapping open and her heart pounding like a jackhammer in her chest. The leg of her chair grated loudly against the library floor and the sound echoed through the expansive room. Ducking down in her seat, she attempted to avoid the annoyed glances directed at her by disturbed fellow students.

>Getting her breathing back under control, she propped up an open hard-cover book and crouched behind it in embarrassment. It wasn't a surprise that she had fallen asleep in the middle of studying. Inconvenient, certainly, but not surprising. Sleep had become somewhat of a stranger to her recently, always interrupted by disturbing memories. And dreams. Always, the dreams.

>They were occurring more frequently now, the echoes of the most recent dream still resounding in her mind, filling her with residual fear. Like the majority of them, this one was difficult, if not impossible, to interpret.

>The Master part was easy enough to figure. A month ago, her old nemesis had almost been resurrected and the close call still evoked tension within her. The bat-faced vampire had been gone for two and a half years, but she hadn't forgotten the terror he had instilled in her. She probably never would.

>The catastrophe that would have resulted from his revival had been averted, barely, but at a terrible price. Gabriel, Giles' nephew and the young man she had come to adore since his arrival in Sunnydale, had been irrevocably hurt that day.

>Buffy closed her eyes and remembered the last time he had held her in his arms. She could recall every detail with flawless accuracy.

Inhaling deeply, she cautiously let the bittersweet memories surface.

>She could hear the sound of his voice, rich and familiar, with just a hint of half a dozen different accents blended together. She remembered the wonderfully exotic scent of sweet spices that his skin exuded and the never-ending warmth of his body against hers. There was an intense sensual tingle that inevitably rose between them when they were close, like an invisible field of a thousand soft-tipped needles against her skin. His presence had always left a dizzying impression on her senses. He was special, like her, with powers equal and comparable to her own, and their specific natures made them constantly aware of one another. She remembered him, touching her and looking at her with loving eyes like she was the only thing that mattered in the entire universe.

>Only now, on the rare occasions when he did look at her, his eyes were always awash in pain.

>Who could blame him though? She had killed his oldest brother right in front of him. Raphael happened to have been a vampire intent on raising the darkest evil Buffy had ever known, but that hadn't made much of a difference to Gabriel. All he knew was that his brother was dead and that the woman he loved had been the one who had caused it. Unable to be near his brother's killer, Gabriel had ended his relationship with her and disappeared from her life.

>She wondered what he was doing at that very moment, whether he was thinking about her or remembering the times when they had been together. Maybe she would catch a fleeting glimpse of him while on patrol tonight. He was still doing his part in the fight against evil, the noticeable decrease in vampire activity lately supported that, but it didn't really matter. He wouldn't stop to talk to her. In fact, he seemed to have been doing his best to avoid her completely. The brief passion they had shared in the dream was the most contact she'd had with him in over a month.

>"You know there are better ways to cop a few Z's during the mid-term rush." An unfamiliar male voice commented in a friendly tone.

>Buffy lifted her head from behind the wall of her book and peered up at the speaker. A young man stood across the table from her wearing a snug, black T-shirt and with a green, canvas backpack slung over one shoulder. He was tall, with a nice physique and dark, carelessly-styled hair. He slid the seat next to her away from the table and slipped into it.

>"You're a freshman, aren't you?" he smiled amiably, his light blue eyes sparkling.

>"What?" she responded, feeling like an idiot.

>"A freshman?" he repeated, "As in new to the whole college experience?"

>"Yeah," she smiled self-consciously, "How'd you guess?"

>He reached out and flipped her book over onto the table, closing it.

>"No offense, but the book-wall is a dead giveaway." He smiled, "Strictly high-school. What you want to do is get one of the private study rooms and pull the blind. Then it's all the undisturbed napping that you can handle."

>"Thanks." She returned his smile, gathering her book into her lap, "I'll remember that. Right now, though, I should really make with the studying and leave the sleeping until after mid-terms."

>That was no understatement. Ever since she had lost Gabriel, her marks had been slowly declining. If she was going to survive the semester, she would have to light a fire under herself and do some serious cramming.

>The young man next to her offered out a friendly hand, "I'm Parker. From Kreskie Hall."

>"Buffy." She responded, accepting his handshake, "My name, I mean. I live over at Stevenson."

>"So you're a psych major?" he asked, indicating the book in her hands.

>"Uh, well, no, not really." She looked down at the book uncomfortably and shrugged, "I'm still sort of trying to decide which of my courses is the least minor. Which I can then build on to become a major."

>"I see." He nodded, his eyes smiling, "What would you say if I told you I might be able to help? With psych, at least."

>She raised an interested eyebrow and tilted her head toward him.

>"I'd probably say what any drowning girl would to a potential liferaft." She quirked a wry smile, "What have you got in mind?"

>He paused for a moment and his mouth twitched in a slight smile.

>"I took psych last year, still have my notes if you want them. But only the ones from first semester." He shrugged sheepishly, "My marks were pretty good, but I had something of a personality conflict with Professor Walsh and she kicked my tender rear to the curb."

>"And she's seemed like such a friendly dragonlady so far." Buffy rolled her eyes.

>Parker pulled the psychology book out of her arms and opened it on the table between them. Gesturing for her to lean in closer, he indicated a list of headings in the table of contents.

>"Walsh is notorious for being a nitpicker on tests." He explained knowingly, "But there's a method to her madness. The trick is to recognize the topics that appeal to her twisted sense of education."

>As he began to comb through the chapters, pausing from time to time to make her take note of a seemingly pointless passage, she started to forget about all the recent heartache and confusion in her life. It wasn't much, but the distraction was enough that she felt like she could actually breathe again. Leaning in attentively, she listened to his voice cataloging the complicated process of deciphering Professor Walsh's tactics and pushed all thoughts of the past to the back of her mind.

>* * *

>Xander circled the worn pool table and lined up his shot. He and Gabriel had been playing at the Bronze for over two hours. It had been strange, hanging around with him without any of the others, but for the last month, Xander had been Gabriel's only friend.

>After the break-up, Willow had reluctantly felt required to avoid Gabriel out of respect for her best friend's feelings and Oz had chosen to support her in that. And Buffy . . . well, she was keeping her distance for obvious reasons. No one was comfortable with the situation, but they all had their obligations.

>But Xander felt no such restrictions. True, the two of them had not gotten off to the best start. Xander had found Gabriel's good looks and superhuman abilities intimidating, to say the least. But he had made the effort to get to know him for Buffy's sake and had been pleasantly surprised. Underneath the cool, confident exterior, Xander had found that Gabriel was as confused and uncertain at times as he himself was.

>Not to mention that the guy had gone through some real hard knocks

lately. Losing a beloved brother and girlfriend all in the span of a couple of days was worthy of disaster classification. Xander couldn't just abandon him.

>"I still can't really believe it." he said, straining across the table with his cue, "I mean you two were, like, attached at the hip. It's weird not seeing you together."

>He jabbed his stick awkwardly and Gabriel smirked as it just grazed the cue ball, sending the shot wide.

>"Aw, man, my trick shoulder again!" Xander complained, rotating his left arm in an exaggerated circle and watching helplessly as the cue ball rolled lazily across the table and hung for an endless moment on the edge of the corner pocket before dropping in.

>"Tough luck." Gabriel smiled wanly and ducked his head under the table's overhead lamp, peering into the pocket. He dug his hand inside and withdrew the ball, placing it almost against the bank on one end of the table and lining up his shot, "Seven, side."

>He cracked the cue ball and it smashed into the seven, driving it cleanly into the side pocket.

>"I wish things were different," he sighed tiredly, "but they're not."

>"I just don't understand why. She loves you, you love her, but you can't be together." Xander leaned on his cue and waited as Gabriel bent over the end of the table and angled a difficult shot, "It doesn't make any sense."

>"You don't have to understand. This is just the way things have to be." he answered, propping his cue between two knuckles and aiming down on the ball, "Combination, two, three, corner."

>With a sharp stab of the stick, he sent the cueball spinning into another ball which then connected with the three, knocking it into the corner pocket.

>"What do you mean 'This is the way things have to be'? That's SO Angel." Xander scoffed, frowning at the way Gabriel's pool balls seemed to be disappearing from the table, "At least he had a reason. I mean it's not like you'd be putting your immortal soul at risk." he raised a dark eyebrow, "It's not, right?"

>"No, it's not that." Gabriel shook his head sadly as he lined up an easy shot at the three, "Three in the corner. It's . . . complicated."

>Xander quirked his eyebrows up in surprise as Gabriel's shot rebounded off the bank and rolled to the other end of the table. The auburn-haired young man growled and thumped the butt of his cue on the floor in irritation. Xander rubbed his chin in thought. He had three balls left on the table, while Gabriel only had one. Most times, Gabriel would have beaten him twice by now. The Seventh Son was in unusually bad form tonight.

>"How complicated can it be? The way I see it, all you two need a little time alone together and then this will all go away." Xander sized up a long corner shot and tapped the ball into another, sending it in a lengthy, curving arc to plunk into the pocket, "Heh, you like that?" he grinned, straightening proudly, "So why don't you just forget about all this and go talk to her?"

>It was not the first time he had made the suggestion and he was not surprised when he received no answer. Gabriel put up a pretty good front, but Xander knew he was hurting. Talking about Buffy usually lasted about five minutes at the most before the Seventh Son turned sour and pensive. According to the clock, he still had four more minutes to get his point across.

>Xander's next shot missed, coming to rest just outside one of the pockets.

>Gabriel didn't visibly react, circling around the table and pretending to be engrossed in sizing up his shot, but Xander recognized the intense expression on his face and knew he was perturbed. Maybe four minutes had been a bit optimistic.

>"Three in the side." Gabriel planted his hand and sank his last ball in one smooth motion, leaving only the eight ball.

>"You're a good friend, Xander, and I appreciate you for trying, but you don't understand." He bent low, sighting along the length of his cue, "I don't want to forget." He snapped the ball into one of the side pockets and tossed his cue to Xander, heading for the door, "Thanks for the game. I had a great time, but it's dark and I gotta go to work."

>* * *

>Riley leaned forward in his seat toward the table with his head propped against his hand, staring dazedly at a pile of ungraded papers stacked before him. A young, black man with a clean-shaven head dropped into the chair opposite him and tapped him on the shoulder.

>"Come on, Finn. You almost done or what?" he asked expectantly, "Library's no place to be on a fine autumn evening like this. Besides, there's a party over at Wolf house. Should be crawling with betties."

>Riley lifted his head and sighed tiredly.

>"Forrest. When does half a stack of papers ever look like finished?" he raised his eyebrows, "Professor Walsh is going to have my head if I don't get these out of the way before tomorrow."

>Forrest shook his head with a slight smile and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest.

>"Man, you've had half a stack left for almost an hour. You're not stuck or anything, are you? I mean you DO have an answer key. Who's paper are we looking at anyway?"

>Reaching out, he caught the corner of the topmost paper between thumb and forefinger and jerked it out of the pile. Riley jumped up instantly to retrieve it, but Forrest wove his upper body back and forth defensively, avoiding his friend's desperate grabs and holding the paper up in front of his eyes.

>"Give it back." Riley made another attempt for it with no success.

>"Summers, Buffy A." Forrest read aloud, "She's that little blond hottie, isn't she? You WERE stuck! I hear she's recently come back on the market if you're interested."

>Riley snatched the paper out of his hands and laid it back on the stack.

>"I wasn't stuck." He maintained as he retook his seat, "And if by 'back on the market' you mean 'devastated and heartbroken', then yes, she is."

>"Any idea who the guy is who dumped her?"

>"No," Riley shook his head, "Some townie, I think. Whoever he is, he's an idiot."

>Forrest folded his hands together under his chin and leaned forward with a thoughtful smile.

>"This might not be such a bad thing for you." He suggested, "One man's folly can easily become another man's fortune."

>"What do you mean?" Riley frowned.

>Forrest gave a non-committal shrug, "Pretty young girl, done wrong by some heartless cad. Maybe you should treat her to some wholesome Iowa goodness?"

>Riley shook his head in negation and sat back.

>"Forget it." He said, "I'm not into that swoop-and-scoop vulture

routine."

>"Suit yourself." Forrest stood up and waited next to his chair, "But a luscious little peach like that ain't gonna hang around forever. If you don't move in, someone else will. Like Parker Abrams, for instance."

>Forrest inclined his head meaningfully toward the middle of the room.

>"What?" Riley perked up, following his friend's indication to the other side of the library.

>Buffy was just getting up from one of the central tables and stuffing her books into her backpack. Beside her, Parker helpfully handed her a bundle of papers which she accepted with an appreciative smile. Riley couldn't control the stunned expression on his face.

>Parker Abrams was well-known for taking advantage of freshmen women, his manipulatory skill honed from years of practice. He always seemed to know exactly what to say. Riley, in contrast, usually found himself tongue-tied whenever he was in Buffy's presence.

>"It's now or never, baby." Forrest grinned and slapped a big hand onto his shoulder.

>* * *

>"Bye." Buffy waved to Parker as he walked away, toward the library's side exit.

>Surprisingly, she found a slight smile on her lips. She was actually starting to feel a little better for once. It felt good to spend time with someone who wasn't always treading on eggshells around her, worried about upsetting her. Parker didn't even know who Gabriel was and, for a time while she had been with him, she had been able to forget her pain. Who would have thought that studying could be therapeutic?

>Slinging her backpack over one shoulder, she started for the main doors, a small measure of renewed vigor in her step. It was a bit past her usual patrol time, but she'd still manage. Parker's tips promised to shave hours off her required study time, which more than made up for the delay.

>As she neared the large double doors, a familiar figure, Riley, the teaching assistant from her psychology class, crossed into her path.

>"Buffy." He smiled nervously, his hands fidgeting before him in sharp, tense movements, "How are you?"

>She stopped and inhaled deeply, holding it for a moment.

>"Hi, Riley." She smiled uneasily, "Look, if this is about my marks, I've kind of had some personal stuff lately that's been interfering with my studying. B-but I'm already getting that under control. Got a tutor and everything."

>He ducked his head and raised his hands, palms outward.

>"No." he assured her, "No, this isn't about your marks. And I know already. About your problems, I mean."

>Buffy groaned inwardly. Great, she lamented silently, the 'Legend of Buffy Summers, Basket-Case at Large' lives on.

>He drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. Looking at her with nervous admiration, he stuffed his hands into his pockets to still them.

>"The thing that I wanted to ask you." He hesitated in agitation, "It's a little personal."

>"Personal?" she echoed. She didn't like the sound of that. She hardly knew Riley, having only seen him around a few times outside of

class. Getting into personal issues with him was not something she felt particularly comfortable doing.

>He seemed to pick up on her discomfort and reacted quickly.

>"I know you just got dumped." He blurted then stopped, making a self-deprecating face, "Uh, wait, that's not what I meant. I meant . . . broke up with your boyfriend. And I don't normally do this but, you see there's one man's folly and—" he paused again to collect himself, "Look, what I'm really trying to say is: Would you like to go out sometime. With me?"

>Her discomfort increased and she shifted under his eager gaze. He just stood there. Waiting. Now what was she supposed to do?

>"Um, I don't really think that's a good idea." She offered diplomatically, "I mean, there's the ethical fact that you're teaching one of my classes and . . . I don't know if I'm really ready yet."

>She really hoped he would take the hint and bow out gracefully. The offer had shocked her a little. She hadn't even considered the possibility of dating someone else. She wouldn't. Fate had taken Angel away from her, she was determined not to lose Gabriel, too.

>But Riley was not ready to give up quite yet.

>"Buffy," he looked at her seriously, "this guy that hurt you, he . . . well, he sounds like a real bastard, pardon my language. You should be with someone who would treat you the way you deserve."

>Anger and hurt flared inside her. Someone who would treat her the way she deserved? Who the hell did he think he was? Gabriel had risked his life time and time again for her, selflessly and completely willing to do whatever it took to insure her safety. And she had paid him back for his devotion by destroying the most important person in his life. The way she saw it, maybe he was treating her the way she deserved.

>"Who are you to judge?!" She snapped irritably, "Gabriel would never intentionally do anything to hurt me! He's just going through a hard time, harder than anything you can imagine."

>She was getting upset, the emotional outburst tapping into the wellspring of her pain. Tears threatened, filling up her eyes and blurring her vision, and she knew she had to get away before things escalated into a full-blown scene. Gasping for breath, she pushed blindly past him and went straight for the exit.

>"You don't even know what you're talking about." She spat over her shoulder, frantically wiping hot tears from her eyes.

>She rushed out and Riley stood helplessly staring at the softly swinging doors, his mouth open to say something, anything, but he couldn't.

>* * *

>Gabriel stalked relentlessly forward, his fists clenched and a determined scowl on his face. The dark-skinned vampire cowered in fear, holding his jaw and scrabbling desperately on his back through the grass. The Seventh Son continued to advance, grabbing a handful of the creature's jacket and hauling him to his feet.

>"What's the matter?" Gabriel cocked back his fist and smashed a hard punch into the vampire's chest, throwing him to the ground again, "I thought you would be looking for a fight."

>"I wasn't!" he cried, throwing his hands over his head, "I was just walking! Walking!"

>"Walking." The auburn-haired young man echoed dubiously, "And I suppose you were over by the UCS campus by chance?"

>The vampire backed against the hard trunk of a tree and crawled up it until he was almost standing again.

>"That's right, I was—" the rest of his sentence passed his lips as a pained wheeze as he caught a solid kick in the gut.

>The vampire bounced off the trunk of the tree and lurched forward, choking and gasping. Gabriel seized the back of his neck and jerked him up straight.

>"Enough!" he growled, snapping a short, powerful chop into the beast's throat and following with a swift jab, "I'm done with this."

>The vampire hit the ground hard, stunned by the attack. Gabriel stood over him, a deadly fire in his emerald eyes and a wooden stake in his hand. His lips pulled back in an angry grimace, he dropped to one knee and slammed the stake into the vampire's heart with enough force to drive it clean through and into the ground. The vampire perished without so much as a grunt, bursting into a cloud of ash and scattering tiny particles over the grass like fine black snow.

>Gabriel bounced to his feet, swift and agitated. Tension bristled in every muscle fiber in his body and his blood still sang with adrenaline. The kill had been clean, he hadn't even sustained a scratch, and it was early, so it was likely that he had prevented someone's death. But he was dissatisfied. He had been hoping for more of a battle from the vampire, something to test himself against, a challenge which he could tackle whole-heartedly. But lately, frustration and impatience had pushed him to new, more desperate limits and he was fighting with brutal efficiency. The chase had lasted barely five minutes, the fight less than two. Seven brief minutes of relief from the turmoil that twisted inside him.

>He kicked away a small stone in annoyance and jammed his hands deep into his jacket pockets, trying not to think about Buffy. His heart ached terribly when thoughts of her crossed his mind. But it wasn't easy at times like this, when he was alone in the dark. Sometimes the only way he could block her out of his head was to immerse himself in the hunt, to find some unfortunate vampire or demon and chase it halfway across town before taking it down. It usually worked, at least for a little while. Then he would have to find another.

>As he turned back toward town his adrenaline rush began to fade and his limbs started to feel heavy. It wasn't late, but he hadn't eaten much during the day and his energy was running low. Maybe for once he would cut things short and go home at a reasonable hour. A strange foreboding feeling crawled up Gabriel's spine and he quickly lifted his head.

>A thin-faced figure topped a small hill and glared down at him in full vampiric face. The creature had a strange, triangular marking on its forehead, some mystical symbol that appeared too dark and crisp to be a tattoo. He looked to have been in his mid-thirties when he had been transformed, dressed in the conservative suit and jacket of a banker and maybe weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet. Not much of a threat, even on a bad day.

>Gabriel eyed the frail-looking thing dubiously and sighed.

>"Look, skinny. I'm not in the mood anymore." He shook his head tiredly and beckoned with a pointed stake, "Come here and let's get this over with."

>The vampire grinned madly and hopped down to the base of the hill in a single bound. Before Gabriel could get his hands up, the vampire's solid fist impacted with his chest like a small, steel battering ram.

>He tumbled back through the grass, skidding and coming up on one knee, his hand pressed against his sternum. The attack had come with blinding speed and hurt more than he cared to admit, but he wasn't worried. In fact, he welcomed it.

>The thin-bodied vampire snarled savagely and dropped into a crouch, ready to spring.

>Gabriel planted his feet and mirrored his opponent, an eager fire igniting in his eyes and his mouth pulling into a bloodthirsty smile. He had found another challenge.

>* * *

>Buffy slung the black bag full of weapons under her arm and ran down the stairs from Stevenson Hall, keeping her face concealed. She had only just stopped crying a few minutes ago and the evidence was still apparent around her eyes and on her cheeks. She didn't want anyone she knew making a big deal and asking her what was wrong.

>The encounter with Riley weighed heavily on her mind. It was like he had been waiting for her or something. God, he must have just smelled the heartbreak on her and swooped in for the kill. Classic Wolf-in-Sheep's-Clothing. Typical. The clean-cut ones were always the last to be suspected. Before this, she had thought that Riley was just a pleasant doof, not some manipulative skirt-chaser. Why couldn't he have been nice, like Parker?

>She cut across the street and headed in the direction of the park. She wasn't in the mood to patrol tonight. All she really wanted was to crawl into bed and sleep for a year. She still had her sacred duty to perform but no one said she couldn't take it easy once in a while. Besides, judging by the downturn in vampire activity lately, it looked like Gabriel had been more than picking up the slack. He had to have been doing at least triple duty to be able to keep the local population down as low as it was. A quick run through the park and then a couple of cemetery stopovers on the way back would probably do. It wasn't much, but she figured it was enough to count.

>As she passed a line of thick brush, she heard a sharp snap, like the sound of a fist smacking into flesh from the other side. Slipping a stake out of her bag and holding it like a knife, she followed the bushes, cocking her ear to the wind. A harsh, lion-like snarl rose less than fifty feet away. Maybe the vampire population wasn't as low as she had thought.

>* * *

>The air whooshed out of Gabriel's lungs as the vampire slammed a hard fist into his gut. Reacting instinctively, he swept a blocking arm across his body and struck out with a counterattack. The small vampire dodged with astonishing quickness and snapped a sharp sidekick into his chest. Gabriel fell back against a tree and rebounded with a forward kick to his opponent's mid-section.

>The attack had been flawlessly executed, focusing every ounce of power he could muster and delivering it to the vampire's vulnerable solar plexus. But the creature shrugged off the blow and immediately countered.

>A swift backhand cracked across Gabriel's jaw, snapping his head sharply to the side. He staggered with the blow to absorb some of the shock, tasting blood in his mouth, and barely blocked a kick aimed at his kidney.

>The skinny vampire raised his arms triumphantly.

>"For the glory of the Master!" he roared, cackling madly, "He is the one!"

>Diving forward, he caught Gabriel around the waist and slammed him

back painfully against the tree again.

>The Seventh Son grunted and coughed from the impact, struggling with the vampire's inhuman strength and attempting to hold it down long enough to dig a stake out of his pocket. He found one tangled in his belt and jerked it free, jamming it down into his attacker's back at a point directly over the heart.

>The wooden weapon sank in about an inch and wedged between two ribs, short of the heart. The vampire released a sharp, lion-like snarl and rammed its shoulder into Gabriel's body, crushing him up against the tree trunk and grating his spine against the rough bark.

>He fought against the vampire as it picked him up and dragged him through a stand of thick, prickling brush. Grunting with the exertion, he twisted free and struck out at the creature's throat. It slapped the attack aside and smashed a quick kick into his side.

Breathless with pain, Gabriel crumpled to his knees in the grass and fell flat on his back.

>The vampire leered down at him and advanced, a murderous light in its dark eyes. It paused in mid-step, cocking its head toward the brush, eyes wide and alert. With a short, angry grunt, the creature turned away swiftly and fled.

>Gabriel rolled to his feet and stood up, nursing an aching jaw and breathing heavily. What had just happened? The vampire had been tough. Too tough. It had fought with a tenacity that was virtually unheard of amongst the local cadre of its peers and almost killed him. And then, for no apparent reason, it had inexplicably given up and retreated. Why?

>Without warning, something swift and powerful exploded from the bushes, catching him around the throat, slamming him to the ground and landing on top of him. Blindly, he grabbed hold of a strong hand that reached for his throat and cocked his fist back for an awkward strike at his unknown opponent. As a weak beam of moonlight spilled across his attacker's face, he froze in shock.

>Buffy sat straddling his chest, her stake hand raised high with Mister Pointy aimed at his heart. Her face looked as startled as his felt.

>"Gabriel!" she exclaimed softly, lowering her arm and reflexively slipping the stake into her pocket, "I-I thought you were a-"

>"Vampire?" he finished for her, feeling the urge to smirk but suppressing it.

>More than a month had passed since the last time he had been this close to her. He had almost forgotten how good it felt to be near her, how her mere presence could lift his spirits and warm his heart.

>"Yeah, um, " she smiled self-consciously with a slight shrug of her shoulders, "Sorry."

>Gabriel sat up sharply and she slid back onto his lap, so close that their faces were almost touching. Distantly, he knew his body was in pain from the fight, but his mind was too preoccupied to register it. A warm, intimate tingling arose between them like a wall of thousands of gentle, tickling, soft-tipped needles. On some deep, unexplored level, his particular Seventh Son nature was reacting with the power of the Slayer. The familiar sensation sank beneath the surface of his skin and into his flesh, sensitizing his nerves and racing through him in a wave of awakening need.

>It seemed like a lifetime since he had touched her, since he had been this near to her. Gabriel's heart pounded in his chest as he gazed longingly into her wide, glistening eyes, losing himself in their captivating depths.

>He could feel her breath, soft and warm against his chin. Buffy's

smooth lips parted slightly and she swallowed anxiously. Gently, tentatively, she brought her hand up, the tips of her fingers hovering above a rapidly darkening bruise along his jawline. The near-touch was maddeningly close.

>"Are . . . are you alright?" she asked breathily, her voice barely audible above the thrumming blood in his ears

>He didn't answer her, instead gripping her in his arms and jerking her into a deep, hungry kiss.

>She met him with equal ardor, pushing him back onto the grass with a soft moan and sliding her body on top of his. She pressed against him with her hands, running them up over his chest, along his neck and tangling her fingers into his thick, auburn hair.

>They strained and fumbled against one another, lost in the endless thrill of the kiss.

>He crushed her into him, finding it impossible to hold her close enough, and drew in a slow, deep breath. Buffy rocked upward against him and shot her hand out to catch her balance, sweeping it through the cool grass and scattering a puff of minute black motes into the air. As he inhaled joyously, filling his lungs with the wonderful scent of her, another smell tickled his brain, releasing a rush of painful memories.

>His entire body went rigid and, in the blink of an eye, he was back there again, at the Restfield Cemetery, reliving the most horrible experience of his life. The smothering stink of burning flesh filled his nostrils and fiery pain streaked along his torso and limbs. Raphael was dying in his arms again, falling away into nothing more than insubstantial dust.

>"Stop it. Stop it! STOP!" he cried desperately, shoving Buffy away and scrambling back, his hands clamped to the sides of his head.

>Buffy tumbled into the grass and sat up in confusion. Instinctively, she reached out to him, but stopped and let her hands drop when she saw the misery on his face.

>His lungs pumped with short, rapid breaths and his gold eyes were livid and unfocused with remembered pain and fear.

>Staggering unsteadily to his feet, he backed away from her, trying to distance himself from the pain. He forced his breathing under control, battling the overpowering, irrational fear that ripped through him.

>"Gabriel . . ." Buffy took a concerned step toward him, but he stopped her abruptly with a raised, open palm.

>"No." he whispered tightly, dropping his head to hide the wetness on his cheeks, "No . . . no more."

>He jammed his eyes tightly shut and turned away from her. His first instinct had been to flee into the night and run until he could run no more, just as it had been on the day that his brother had died, but he didn't. Something stopped him. The same thing that had held him back then continued to keep him rooted firmly to the spot now. Her.

>No matter how great his pain, he couldn't bear the thought of being totally separated from her. But his brother's loss still hurt him like an open wound. It had felt like he, himself, had been the one to perish in the flames that day in the cemetery.

>"Buffy, I-" he turned halfway around and stopped, his voice dropping off into nothing.

>Buffy was gone. As silent as a soft breeze, she had retreated into the night and disappeared.

>* * *

>Riley stood before a tall mirror, staring steadily into the eyes of

his reflection alongside Forrest and Graham. A green beam passed painlessly over the three of them, scanning.

>"Retinal scan accepted." A low, metallic voice sounded.

>The mirror slid up into the wall and a pair of elevator doors opened. The three young men stepped inside and the doors closed behind them. Slowly the elevator began to descend.

>"So?" Forrest asked expectantly, facing Riley, "How did it go at the library? Is operation 'White Knight' a go or what?"

>Riley sighed and shook his head.

>"What's going on?" Graham folded his arms over his chest and raised his eyebrows in question.

>"Riley's got the hots for this little blond number in Professor Walsh's class." Forrest snickered, clapping a friendly hand to Riley's shoulder, "She's on the rebound, so I figure our boy's got to have SOME chance."

>"Buffy." Riley shrugged the hand away, "Her name's Buffy. And, if you must know, things went terrible."

>He paused long enough to lean into a wall-mounted speaker.

>"Things. Went. Terrible." He repeated distinctly.

>"Initiative vocal code match complete." The computer voice returned, "Special agent Finn, Riley. Identity number 75329."

>"Bad, huh?" Forrest slouched casually against the elevator wall.

>"Worse than that." Riley answered, "I was about as smooth as broken asphalt. And then there was the babbling, like this river of nonsense just came spewing out of my mouth."

>"Hm. Spewing." Forrest commented thoughtfully, "Not a good sign in any arena."

>"All I really got out of it is that her ex's name is Gabriel." He shrugged, "And that she appears to still have some major issues with him."

>"Gabriel?" Forrest frowned, "That's awfully . . . biblical. How much fun could a girl have with an angel?"

>Riley slumped against the wall and continued with his story.

>"And then, right out of the blue, I started trashing the guy and she just lost it." He pressed his palm against his forehead and groaned regretfully, "God, I am SUCH an idiot!"

>Graham smiled and patted his friend consolingly on the back.

>"Don't worry about it, man." He counseled, "There's lots of fish in the sea. I'm sure she's a great girl, but what makes her so different from everybody else?"

>The elevator lurched to a cushioned halt and the rear doors opened, revealing a wide-open underground complex, milling with small formations of soldiers and people in white lab coats.

>One of the lab-coats broke away from the others and approached the three young men with quick efficient steps, holding a clipboard and pen under her arm. She was a middle-aged woman with short-cropped blonde hair and a seemingly perpetual serious scowl etched on her face.

>"Gentlemen," she greeted curtly, "Glad to see you could finally make it. Your fellow agents are already waiting in the briefing room."

>She turned without waiting for a response and started along a long, metal catwalk.

>"Briefing room?" Riley jogged a little to catch up with her while Forrest and Graham trailed only a few feet behind, "Is there a

situation?"

>"Not just any situation, Agent Finn." She stopped at a metal door that was inset into the wall, "We could be looking at full-blown disaster."

>Swiping her keycard through a slot next to the door, she quickly punched in a number code on the panel underneath and waited impatiently until the door slid aside.

>Riley, Forrest and Graham followed her inside and found three empty chairs off to the side as Professor Walsh took the podium at the front. Riley briefly passed his eyes over the room before taking his seat. It looked like every active soldier in the entire complex was present. In all the years he had been part of the Initiative, he couldn't remember such a large assembly ever being called. It couldn't mean anything good.

>"Quite a party, huh?" Forrest whistled appreciatively under his breath.

>"Just what I was thinking." Riley nodded, as Professor Walsh dimmed the lights and pulled down a wide, white screen.

>Clicking a hand-held frame advancer, she brought up the projection of a pale vampire face on the screen. Its hairless head was distorted and ugly, with an upturned bat-like nose and a stain of pink around its mouth.

>"Ugh." Graham made a disgusted face, repulsed.

>"This, agents, is the reason you have been called here today." She traced the outside edge of the face with a long, wooden pointer.

>Professor Walsh crossed her arms over her chest and held the pointing stick tightly in her fist, tapping it tensely against her side.

>"Meet Hostile Prime." She stated with dread seriousness.

>A rush of murmurs ran through the room as she paused while her statement elicited a reaction from the group.

>"Hostile Prime?" Forrest screwed his face into a knot, "There's no containment cell called 'prime'."

>"Something tells me it would take a lot more than four walls to contain that thing." Riley whispered, his eyes glued to the projected image.

>Professor Walsh paced back and forth next to the screen, periodically flicking through new slides. Each frame depicted the fearsome vampire in the midst of various violent acts as well as gruesome scenes of destruction that had been attributed to him.

>"The Initiative kept close tabs on Hostile Prime for years, studying from a distance while the creature remained trapped within the Sunnydale catacombs." She explained, "The project was unexpectedly cut short two and a half years ago when our surveillance equipment went offline as a result of a localized earthquake. Two days later, when the system was up and running again, it was discovered that Hostile Prime had inexplicably broken free of its imprisonment and subsequently disappeared. We assumed it had been destroyed."

>She circled around and positioned her hands on the corners of the podium.

>"That is, until yesterday."

>The projector snapped to the next slide, displaying the projection of a digital tracking readout.

>"Hostile Prime has a very distinctive power signature." She indicated the image on the screen, "It has been referred to in some circles as the mark of a master vampire. Last night, a routine patrol ran across a hostile with this exact signature. Three of the five

agents involved are now in intensive care. The last two didn't survive transport."

>Riley sat up straight in alarm. He hadn't heard about any casualties, particularly fatal ones, in the last twenty-four hours. All the time he'd been spending fretting over Buffy Summers lately had certainly dulled his edge.

>"The readouts obtained on the creature indicate something unexpected." Walsh continued, "All signs place it at less than a week old. While there is no doubt that this is our old friend from the catacombs, there's obviously a new factor in the equation now."

>She stepped into the projector beam, throwing a tall, dark shadow against the screen.

>"This is no practice drill, agents. As of this moment there is a standing yellow alert on all patrol squadrons." She declared, "If any of you meet up with a hostile whose signature matches the one on screen, do not engage. Withdraw to the closest safehouse and notify the main compound immediately."

>Walking over to the wall, she snapped the switch, flooding the room with fluorescent radiance.

>"That is all, agents." She announced, "Dismissed."

>Riley blinked his eyes as they adjusted to the brightness. He was having trouble digesting what he'd just heard. In the event of a tagged hostile roaming free, Professor Walsh would normally spare no resource until it was dealt with in an extreme and expedient manner. And here she was issuing a by to a proven high-class hostile.

>As one, the assembly rose and began filing out of the room. Forrest bounced to his feet and smiled ironically down at Riley.

>"Today's just full of good news, isn't it?"

>Riley nodded uneasily and stood up, starting toward the exit.

>"Agent Finn." Professor Walsh called, beckoning with a practiced head movement, "I'd like you to stay behind for a minute."

>Forrest shot him a questioning glance and Riley shrugged, equally confused. The young, black man exited with Graham in tow, leaving Riley and Professor Walsh alone in the briefing room.

>"Is there something you wanted, Professor?" he asked dutifully.

>She clutched her clipboard to her chest and paced back and forth in a short circuit before him.

>"You recall the briefing I gave a few months back on the possibility of a vigilante vampire hunter in the area?"

>"Yes." He answered, reflexively folding his hands behind his back in an at-ease posture, "Information was sketchy, but worth looking into from what I remember. Has something new come up?"

>The Professor slipped a small electronic device out of the pocket of her labcoat and handed it to him.

>"The number of occurrences has increased over the past month." She revealed, tapping a rectangular screen on the device, "Enough for us to obtain a force reading on the perpetrator."

>Riley observed the readout with a troubled frown. After years of tracking various demons and vampires, he was well versed in determining what information the pattern contained.

>"This almost looks human." He stated, "But it can't be. The readings are too high, way out of the human norm. The integrity of the data must have been compromised."

>"Excellent observation, agent Finn." She congratulated proudly, "But

the data was obtained multiple times. It's fine. Our vigilante is human. Or at least partly so."

>She turned her clipboard around and displayed a blue and white map of Sunnydale, sectioned off with a grid. Using the end of her pen, she pointed to a scattering of small red markers arrayed over its surface.

>"The readings were taken at these points and so far no discernable pattern to the vigilante's movements has been detected." She circled the map with the tip of her pen coming to rest over the area that contained the UCS campus, "He appears to roam the entirety of the city limits, with only slightly more frequent occurrences here."

>Riley stroked his chin in thought.

>"So you think he's a student." He surmised.

>"Most likely. And since the readings were never concentrated before this year, I assume he would be a freshman." She handed him a small folder and turned the clipboard around again into her chest, "This is a copy of all the information we have to date. Study it. I want you to make it your personal duty to track down this signal, find the source. If this vigilante is located on campus, he could represent a serious threat to the security of our organization."

>Riley accepted the dossier and slipped it under his arm.

>"And my orders when I find him?" he asked confidently. There was no question of whether he would complete his mission, just when.

>"Everything you need to know is contained in the dossier." She nodded, an indication that his private briefing was ended, "Good luck, Riley."

>"You don't have anything to worry about, Professor." He assured her, straightening to attention, "I won't let you down."

>* * *

>Willow shifted an ungainly pile of books in her arms and balanced them against her hip while she dug in her pocket for the key to her dorm room. The books almost fell twice before she managed to wrestle the key into the lock and open the door. Stepping inside, she shoved the door closed with her rear and rushed over to her study desk, dumping the heavy books in an unceremonious pile.

>At the end of the desk was a jar stuffed with a dozen red roses. Curious, she looked for a card but didn't find one. Oz had left for a week-long trip into L.A. with the Dingoes yesterday and he wasn't due back until Friday. The flowers must have been from him. He always found some way to remind her that he would be back before she knew it.

>"They came while you were out."

>Startled, she whipped around and found Buffy sitting cross-legged on her bed cradling Mister Gordo the stuffed pig in her lap.

>"Buffy! I didn't think you'd be back so soon." she exclaimed, stopping short, concerned, "Oh, no, you've got Mister Gordo. How are you feeling?"

>"Okay, I guess." Buffy answered sullenly, staring into her lap and pulling absently at Mister Gordo's soft pink ears, "The black hole of despair I've been living in lately might better be described as closer to charcoal gray."

>"It'll be all right, Buffy." Willow sat on the edge of the bed next to her and hugged her tightly, "Give it time. Gabriel will come around."

>Buffy shook her head morosely, "You haven't seen him. You don't know how hurt he is. It's like he's just empty now and it's killing him.

And being near me only makes it worse."

>"Don't say that." The auburn-haired girl protested, "He needs you. Whether he knows it or not. When he's ready, he'll let you know. Things will work out with you two." Willow patted her friend's shoulder consolingly, "They have to, you're too good together."

>Buffy sighed deeply, "Yeah, well, I thought that once before and it didn't change a thing."

>Willow watched her sympathetically. When Buffy had lost Angel the first time, she had been devastated. After graduation, she had lost him again when he left for LA. Then, when things had finally started to look like they were getting better, she had lost Gabriel as well. Willow wouldn't have wanted to trade places with her for the world.

>Reaching into her shoulder bag, she withdrew two white, rectangular tickets decorated with black cats and jack-o-lanterns.

>"Here, I brought you something." She handed the tickets to Buffy, "Maybe it will cheer you up."

>Buffy accepted them silently and without question, staring blankly at the names printed across the long edge of each one. Buffy A. Summers and Guest.

>"They're for the Halloween Bash on Friday." Willow explained, "The girl at the desk didn't want to give me yours, but then I told her how we're roomies now and everything was okay. Should be lots of Halloweenie fun."

>"I don't think I'm going to go." The blonde girl opened the drawer to her desk and tossed the tickets inside before closing it again.

>"Why? You HAVE to go." Willow pleaded, "Halloween wouldn't be the same without you. Besides, you need to start getting out."

>"I DO get out."

>Willow regarded her skeptically, "Patrols don't count."

>"Maybe you're right." Buffy allowed, sliding the drawer open again and looking inside, "While moping has become my pastime of choice lately, it's highly doubtful that it will become a competitive sport in the near future. It probably wouldn't hurt to start thinking social again. So, you get a costume yet?"

>Willow smiled brightly, pleased to see a measure of life returning to her friend.

>"Oz is taking care of it for me. He's going to pick it up on his way home." She reported proudly then snickered, rolling her eyes melodramatically, "Xander thinks he has the idea of the century just like every year. He'll probably just go out and rent something at the last minute again. I told him he could have my extra ticket, but he wants to invite Anya, too. I was thinking maybe you could give her yours."

>"Because we all know I won't be using it, right?" Buffy smirked wryly.

>"Oh, no, I didn't mean that." Willow apologized quickly, "I just thought it would be nice, that's all."

>"I know, Willow." Buffy smiled weakly in response, "I'm well aware of my dumpee status, I should be allowed to joke about it once in a while. Guess going stag is something I'll have to get used to. Tell him the ticket is his if he wants to come get it. I may be nice, but not enough to deliver."

>* * *

>Outside the girls' window, Michael hung effortlessly by his hands from a thirty foot high tree branch, watching with narrowed eyes and an evil grin. He used to be afraid of heights, but now it wasn't even

a consideration. Ever since he had tapped the power of the Hellmouth and melded his mind with the Master's, he had been changing. His muscles appeared no different, but they were like steel now, stronger than he had ever dreamed possible. Darkness was no longer an impediment to his eyes and his other senses had sharpened immensely as well. He felt like an entirely new creature, finally worthy of all that the world had to offer.

>Of all those things he desired, though, there was one that took precedence over all else. Willow was so close, he could almost feel her. It pleased him that she had liked the roses he had sent. It was but a small token of his affection, but all he would risk for the moment. She was not ready to learn of his feelings, not yet. Her heart was still too tangled up by the influence of that beast, the werewolf.

>But soon the time would be right for him to make his move. And there were other things to occupy his mind with until then. Underlying his desire for Willow was another, equally powerful desire for her companion. If he closed his eyes, he could almost feel her soft flesh under his fingertips, the heat of her blood. But this craving was nowhere near loving. The flesh was there to be rent and torn, the blood to be feasted on. Death would be a gift to the Slayer when it came, when he finally allowed it. But before that, she would suffer for what she had done to him.

>Dropping fearlessly to the ground, he landed with the nimbleness of a cat and grinned maliciously, exposing newly-formed, pointed canines. Michael's days of being afraid were over.

>* * *

>Gabriel entered his uncle's living room and slipped off his jacket, dropping it over the back of one of the chairs. He'd had a bad night last night, like he'd been having for a while now, and felt dull and annoyed from lack of sleep. His entire night had been filled with restless nightmares.

>But he was at Giles' apartment now, tired and irritable as he was, to fulfill his obligation.

>Xander followed behind him, in the midst of a conversation, "So this vamp just wiped the floor with you?"

>"He didn't wipe the floor with me." Gabriel insisted with half-hearted annoyance, "The fight was . . . interrupted."

>Frowning, he peered around the seemingly empty apartment.

>The place looked different than it had the last time he had been there, more than a month ago. Most of the furniture had been rearranged, moved multiple times by the look of things. Ever since Rupert had become 'a gentleman of leisure' as he called it, he appeared to have far too much time on his hands.

>"Uncle Rupert?" he called out, "Are you here?"

>When no one answered, he stepped further into the room. It was strange for his uncle to go out and leave the front door unlocked.

>"Well, lookie-loo," a familiar voice sneered, "If it isn't the scarecrow and the tin-man. One hasn't got a brain, the other's got no heart."

>Gabriel's eyes narrowed and fixed hatefully on the blonde-haired vampire who reclined on his uncle's sofa, facing the curtained window. As he had already noted, a lot had changed here in the past month.

>"Spike." Xander acknowledged with a disgusted expression, "Always a pleasure."

>While Xander hung close to the door, Gabriel circled around the

couch, facing the window with his back turned to the vampire in disregard.

>"Where's my uncle?" He asked flatly, looking out the window between the drapes, his lips tight.

>"Don't get me wrong, now." Spike continued, oblivious to the question as he idly flipped through a tattered magazine, "Breakin' the Slayer's heart was pure theatrical genius. It's been a real gas seein' her come over here all weepy and stuff, but my problem's with the approach. I mean dumpin' her for her own good? It's been done."

>Bursting into action, the Seventh Son sharply swept his arm wide and threw open the drapes, flooding the room with sunlight. Spike vaulted behind the sofa and dove desperately for the shadows, narrowly avoiding incineration.

>Xander folded his arms across his chest and grinned cockily.

>"Not such a comedian now, are you, Mister Witty-Metaphor?"

>Spike fixed him with a withering expression.

>Gabriel stalked around the sofa and swiftly grabbed hold of Spike's wrist, his eyes flashing with anger. Pivoting sideways, he twisted the joint and jammed his foot against the vampire's throat, pinning him to the wall.

>Xander was alarmed by the violence of the attack and took an uneasy step back.

>"Hey, um, Gabriel?" he rubbed at the back of his head in discomfort, "Not that it would be a problem with me, but if you croak Prince Charming here, Giles will have a conniption. Not to mention a big dusty mess to clean up."

>"Yeah," Spike grunted against the pressure on his throat, "You and your goody-good friends need me."

>"Let's get this straight, William." Gabriel hissed venomously, pulling on Spike's arm for leverage and increasing the pressure on his throat, "Unlike everyone else around here, I don't give a damn about keeping you alive. Where. Is. My. Uncle."

>"I'm right here." Giles called from the open doorway, turned half away from the room with a pair of brown paper grocery bags in his arms, "Sorry I'm late. Just stepped out to pick up a few things at the pharmacy."

>Gabriel's gaze remained fastened on the vampire and he leaned a little harder with his foot.

>"Urghg!" Spike choked, pawing ineffectively at Gabriel's ankle with his unfettered hand.

>Giles' eyes flew wide and he dropped his bags, rushing across the room past Xander and hooking his arms around his nephew's torso in an attempt to pull the boy off Spike. Gabriel ignored him, pushing forward and applying even greater force to the vampire's throat.

>"I tried to tell him you'd be mad." Xander said to Giles with a helpless sigh while Spike twisted and struggled uselessly.

>"Gabriel." Giles tugged him back, "Gabriel, let him go."

>The young man reluctantly complied, jerking his foot back and letting Spike slide, coughing, to the floor. Disdainfully, he tossed the vampire's hand down and turned toward the center of the room.

>"I never thought I'd see the day when William the Bloody would walk freely around me or my kin." He scowled in annoyed disbelief.

>Spike glared at him from where he sat on the floor, rubbing at his

throat.

>"The way things are going with you, old chap, it won't be long before your kin are all gone." He chuckled cruelly.

>Gabriel whirled angrily, his lip curled and his hands balled into fists at his sides.

>"Enough!" Giles shouted, placing a restraining palm against his nephew's chest, "Both of you."

>He turned a stern look on Spike, "We may need your information about the Initiative, but it does not give you the right to abuse my family."

>Gabriel relaxed his fists. The Initiative. Due to his preoccupation lately, he knew very little about the secretive organization, less than even the sparse information his uncle had to offer. But from what he had heard, they were trouble.

>"Oh, we're family now?" Spike arched a dark eyebrow, "I do believe this is the first time he's been over since big brother bit the dust. How's that for family?"

>Gabriel hung his head, shaking it tiredly. The reason he had been absent so much lately was not his uncle's lack of hospitality. He had been avoiding anything and everything that would remind him of his brother's passing.

>"I'm not here about family matters." Gabriel stated, "I'm here on business."

>"Business?" Giles lifted his eyebrows.

>"Yeah," Xander supplied, "this crazy vamp with a nutso symbol on his head gave Gabriel a real run for his money last night."

>Gabriel nodded gravely, folding his arms tightly over his chest and leaning his back against the wall. He shifted slightly as a bruise on his back pressed painfully against the plaster.

>"Just one?" Rupert frowned in confusion, "I've seen you battle half a dozen vampires at the same time. How could just one give you trouble?"

>"I don't know, but it did."

>Lifting up the front of his shirt, Gabriel revealed an angry blue and purple mark over his muscled stomach and another, equally painful-looking bruise across his chest. Rupert, of all people, knew that his Slayer-like resilience and recuperative powers were enough to make typical patrol nicks and bruises almost unnoticeable by the next morning. These would likely last a week or more.

>"Dear God." Giles gasped, "What happened?"

>"Man," Xander whistled low and long, "You look like you got hit by a truck!"

>Gabriel knew that he had made his point with his uncle.

>"I told you, it was a tough vamp." He dropped his shirt down, "But it said something that worries me. It made a reference to the Master. In the present tense."

>Spike stood up swiftly, amusement showing on his pale face.

>"You're kiddin', right? A Master vampire? Here!?" he raised an incredulous eyebrow. Skirting the edge of the rectangle of sunlight on the floor, he made his way into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, ducking his head inside, "Oh, you blokes ARE in trouble."

>"I don't know what it means." Gabriel said, ignoring Spike completely and directing his statement toward his uncle, "But it could be trouble."

>Rupert pursed his lips and began to pace, tapping his finger against his chin in thought.

>"Is Buffy aware of what happened?" he asked.

>Gabriel didn't answer right away. The encounter with the vampire wasn't the only thing that had disturbed him about last night.

>"No," he shook his head, "You and Xander are the only ones. I thought you could tell her."

>"Perhaps you should be the one." Rupert suggested carefully.

>"I can't." Gabriel swallowed uneasily, shoving his hands into his pockets to stop them from trembling.

>"What do you mean?" Giles regarded him with confusion.

>"I said, I can't." the young man reiterated sharply, beginning to pace, his mouth turned into a thin, hard line, "I just can't."

>Rupert stood still and watched his movements. Reaching out, he laid a gentle hand on his nephew's shoulder.

>"I know losing Raphael was hard on you." He said, "It was hard on all of us, but you must move on."

>"You hardly knew him." Gabriel's eyes narrowed in anger and he shrugged irritably away from the comforting hand, "Ever since I was little, he took care of me. I owe him everything."

>Rupert backed away a little and looked to the young man sadly.

>"But he's gone now, Gabriel. You need to think about the living." He counseled, tucking his hands into his pockets, "I-I've spoken with Buffy. She's very upset. She misses you terribly. It isn't going to help anything if you keep avoiding her."

>A dull, lonely pain turned in Gabriel's stomach and his heart thumped hollowly in longing inside him. So she had been here. He wondered how much time had passed between her departure and his arrival, how close he had come to seeing her again.

>"Angel told me something once, before he left for Los Angeles." Gabriel responded, "He said that sometimes what someone wants to do and what someone needs to do aren't the same thing. I think this is one of those times."

>Xander snorted and rolled his eyes in disgust.

>"Leave it to Angel to suggest the long and tortured route." He groaned in exasperation, "You don't have to be like Angel. The way I see it, sometimes what someone thinks he needs to do just screws up his whole life and turns him into brooding, humorless, wet blanket."

>"Xander may have a point." Giles agreed, "Don't you think you've punished her enough?"

>Gabriel closed his eyes and tensed, angry and hurt. He felt empty without her. He would gladly give a year of his life just to hold her again. But it wasn't that simple. Deep down, he knew his uncle was only trying to help, but the man just didn't understand.

>"You just don't get it. This isn't about punishing her." He paused for an instant near the window, "It's about punishing me."

>"What?" Giles gasped, stunned.

>Gabriel turned to the window and stared out, letting the pale sunlight warm his face.

>"Before I left Thailand, I fought with Raphael." he revealed sadly, his eyes focused on some distant point in the past.

>"Go on." He urged gently, wary of the young man's vulnerability.

>Gabriel nodded thoughtfully.

>"It was the first time we ever had a real fight and I wouldn't give up. I had this stupid idea that I needed to be on my own, like having him look out for me made me weak or something. He tried to convince

me that I was wrong, but I wouldn't listen. In the end, he let me go to Scotland without him." His hand clenched into a fist at his side, "Instead, he went to Egypt and got killed."

>Giles sighed sympathetically and shook his head.

>"You can't blame yourself for his death, Gabriel." He advised, "Raphael's life was his responsibility alone. If he had gone to Edinburgh with you, he may very well have stepped in front of a bus or slipped down a flight of stairs. What happened to him was not your fault."

>Xander noisily cleared his throat.

>"Why don't we play Point-the-Finger later and get to the more immediate problem?" Xander suggested, tapping his friend's shoulder, "Like this whole situation you've got going with Buffy. It's really getting out of hand. Do you realize that the whole town could get wasted just because you feel uncomfortable talking to her?"

>Gabriel's face became tense, as it always did lately at the mention of Buffy's name.

>"That's not going to happen, Xander." He replied with a slight edge to his voice, "If real trouble comes up then we'll stop it. All of us."

>Xander disregarded the dark tone of his voice, having become accustomed to the Seventh Son's recent surliness.

>"And a vampire that was strong enough to give you a king-sized hiney-whupping doesn't register as real trouble?" he asked pointedly, "And what if the next time there's more of these things? We could be talking about a whole new breed here."

>"Xander's right, Gabriel, you have to talk to her." Rupert interjected, "If not for your sake, then for everyone else's."

>Gabriel sank into one of Rupert's chairs and lowered his head, leaning heavily with his hands clasped together and his forearms resting on his thighs.

>"You don't understand." He lifted his head, his green eyes filled with loss, "How much could I have really cared for my brother if I still love her? I can't betray him again."

>Xander sighed and rubbed at the back of his head.

>"Look, I know you came from this super-strict background with all kinds of rules and stuff," he said, "but some things don't have rules. You're in love with her and you think it's suppose to follow this neat little path. It's not like that. Love's messy." He grinned humorously, "If you do it right."

>The corners of Gabriel's mouth twitched upward and he gave a half-hearted laugh at the joke as he rose slowly to his feet.

>Giles looked to Xander with bewildered surprise.

>"That's . . . very astute, Xander." He congratulated haltingly, "One wonders where you might have become so observant."

>"It was Jerry Springer's final thought on Monday." Xander smiled, unable to outright ruin Rupert's image of him, "Control freaks and the women who love them. It's not that much different if you really think about it."

>"Well, yes," Giles turned away, shaking his head, "I must have, um . . . missed that . . . one."

>The three stood in silence for a long moment until Gabriel sighed softly and picked up his jacket.

>"Come on, Xander." He prompted, heading for the exit, "We should get going."

>"Where to?" Xander pulled on his own jacket and followed after him.

>"The UCS campus." The auburn-haired young man replied as he opened the door and started down the hallway, "To see if it's not too late for me to fix things."

>"It's about time." Xander closed the door behind them, "I was starting to get tired of playing relationship councilor."

>* * *

>Michael paced back and forth in the ruin that had once been the Sunnydale High School, his hands clenching and unclenching in agitation. Propped on a sharp jag of broken rock, the Master's skull watched him with hollow sockets.

>"What are we WAITING for?!" Michael demanded of the inanimate object, "It's been more than a week and all I've done is cast one stupid linking spell on a wimpy insurance salesman."

>*The spell was a worthy experiment.* the Master's ethereal voice sounded in his head, *If I am to regain my full power, I must have a Vessel. By channeling myself into a vampire, I can give it strength. In return, its kills become mine. My new Vessel has proven to be quite effective.*

>The young man shifted his gaze to the skinny, suited vampire that stood against the wall, still and silent as a statue. The creature was no bigger than he was, but thanks to the linking spell, it possessed a strength that could rival the Slayer's. It followed the Master's commands to the letter without question and would wait in loyal readiness until commanded to do otherwise.

>Michael didn't care though. He wasn't interested in having slavish vampire minions. The power he craved was something insubstantial and yet far more powerful. The Master had already taught him some powerful sorcery, but only the spells that would further his own dark designs. While his limited magical knowledge had been magnified tenfold through the guidance of his new mentor, he still didn't have what he really desired. Willow, the sweetest, most beautiful girl he had ever met. Michael was no closer to attaining her now than he had been a month ago, a year ago, a lifetime ago.

>"Yes, YOUR Vessel." Michael snorted and crossed his arms sourly over his chest, "YOUR power and YOUR plans. When do I get what I want?"

>*Patience, Minion.* the Master cautioned with a dark chuckle, completely aware of his host's dissatisfaction but unconcerned, *I haven't forgotten your little witchling. But we have more important concerns.*

>"I don't want to be patient anymore!!" the young man hissed venomously, his voice echoing in the near-empty chamber.

>*There are forces we must deal with before our plans can come to fruition. I have old enemies underground who have increased in strength and number over the last three years. And now there is this young man you've seen.*

>Michael pursed his lips worriedly. The youth in question appeared, on the surface, to be no more than a typical boy Michael's age. But Michael's eye was not untrained and he knew what he had seen.

>"He's one of them." He nodded gravely, "A Seventh Son of a Seventh Son, I know it."

>The Master's presence curled inside his skull, reaching through his synapses with almost imperceptible filaments of power, considering.

>*If he is what you believe then why would he hunt vampires? A Seventh Son has no compulsion to battle evil. Some of them even embrace it. I should know, I used to be one.*

>"It's that Slayer." Michael spat petulantly, "Where she goes, he

follows."

>Michael felt an odd, dark mirth rise within him and realized the Master was laughing.

>*Then let him.* his voice sounded confidently, *I'm about to lead her straight to her doom.*

>"And how do you plan to do that? The Slayer will destroy your Vessel just like she did the last time."

>The Master's laughter rumbled silently and Michael felt his mouth twist up into an unintentional smile. It was strange at times, this melding of minds. His body was no longer solely his own and it occasionally responded to his skull-mate's emotions. The feeling was similar to being drunk in a way. He would feel the smile in the muscles of his face, but not the emotion that it originated from. Disturbing, but worthwhile if it would get him closer to his beloved Willow.

>*The ritual I have taught you is stronger than the one I cast on Luke. It creates a being that is not only an extension of my thirst, but of my power as well.* the Master's cruel glee peaked, *One Vessel may not have been enough to destroy her. But I don't plan to make use of one Vessel.*

>Michael's legs jerked suddenly of their own accord and carried him haltingly across the chamber to the broken wall, the one that lead to the outside. Surprised, he came face to chest with a tall vampire who had been waiting silently in the open passageway. The creature was solidly built and smelled of the dust and dry death of a burial crypt. Its thick neck gave way to a solid, square jaw and a feral-looking visage. The vampire's dark gaze was distant and unfocused. Behind it, others of its kind waited with similar, dull-eyed discipline, called by the Master's unholy beckon.

>*I will make use of a legion!*

>* * *

>Buffy burrowed through one of her dresser drawers in search of a particular item of clothing.

>"Hey Will, did you see my fuzzy blue sweater?" she shouted into the drawer, reaching for the back.

>Willow peered up over the top of a hard-covered book and paused in perusing her notes.

>"Look in my basket." She pointed to a freshly washed bundle of clothes at the foot of her bed, "I took some of your stuff with me to the laundromat this afternoon." Buffy hopped up and went to the basket, pulling her sweater out of the pile. Bunching it up against her face, she inhaled deeply.

>"Oh, hey, you made it all spring-time freshy!" she marveled happily, slipping her arms through the holes, "You are SO the laundry queen."

>Willow smiled to herself and shrugged.

>"I don't think using fabric softener is really worthy of a coronation, but who am I to argue?"

>She closed her book and sat up, laying her pen and paper aside as Buffy checked herself in the mirror.

>"So where are you getting all ready to go to?" the auburn-haired girl asked.

>Hastily smoothing back her hair and pulling it into a pony-tail, Buffy tied it with a navy-blue scrunchie.

>"Nowhere special. Just the library." She paused and frowned in frustration, "Dammit, where is my jacket?"

>Willow got up and closed the closet door over with a small sigh, revealing Buffy's jacket hanging on the handle. Buffy thankfully grabbed up the garment and pulled it on.

>"Thanks," she blew out a tense breath and checked her watch, "I'm already late."

>Willow stopped her rush with a hand on her shoulder.

>"You're going to see Parker again?" she questioned, worry creeping into her coffee-brown eyes.

>Buffy squeezed past her friend and found her backpack at the bottom of the closet, slinging both straps over one shoulder.

>"Occupational hazard." She shrugged, unconcerned, "Kind of hard to get tutored without a tutor. What have you got against Parker?"

>Willow sucked on her bottom lip in thought for a moment and shrugged softly, leaning her back against the door.

>"Nothing, I guess." She said hesitantly, "I don't know. There's just something about him. Gives me the willies, bad ones." She took Buffy's hand and squeezed it gently, "There's something wrong about him."

>"Thanks for the concern, Willow." Buffy smiled, hugging her briefly and pulling the door open, "but I'm okay. We've both seen Parker in full daylight, he's no threat. Besides, he's been really supportive. No disparagement on Xander or Oz, but it's nice to have that from a guy, you know?"

>Willow nodded in mute agreement.

>"Just be careful." She said, "Okay?"

>Buffy stepped into the hall and checked her watch again.

>"Don't worry," she assured her, "tonight's all about quiet study time."

>* * *

>The leader of the three commandos rushed, silent and furtively, up the grassy hill, navigating by the light of a small sliver of moon. His two companions followed more slowly, their stun-guns hanging loosely at their sides.

>"Finn, man, relax." The taller of the two called softly, "What's the rush? We haven't seen a thing all night."

>The other commando chuckled and elbowed his companion in the ribs.

>"Ten to one he's got blondie on the brain again."

>Riley paused in the shadow of a tall tree and made a sharp, rebuking gesture.

>"This is serious Graham." He hissed in annoyance, "Professor Walsh entrusted me with a mission and I don't take that lightly."

>Forrest pulled a granola bar out of his pocket and peeled away the wrapper, leaning his back casually against the tree.

>"I know, you keep reminding us." He broke the bar in two and stuffed both pieces into his mouth, letting the foil wrapper drop to the grass, "But you still never said what that hash to do with ush."

>Riley bent low and snatched up the wrapper with a tired sigh, tucking it into his pocket.

>"It's confidential." He shook his head in negation, "All you need to do is keep an eye out for this new power reading I showed you. I'll take care of things from there."

>Forrest rolled his eyes and groaned, swallowing a mushy mouthful of granola.

>"Don't give me that confidential crap, Riley." He tapped a hard fingernail against the small read-out screen of his detection device, "What IS this thing? A vamp? Demon? Doesn't look like anything I've ever seen before."

>Riley smirked and raised his eyebrows sarcastically, "There's a lot of things you've never seen before."

>Forrest shoved his hand-held device into his pocket and gave him a friendly punch in the arm.

>"Heads up, agents." Graham warned alertly, "I've got a hit on our second signature."

>He held his detector out to arm's length and made a slow turn, watching the digital screen. With a brisk, covert hand-signal, he indicated a distinct direction and the three soldiers fell into formation to pursue.

>"It's moving fast, straight for the campus." Forrest noted, checking his own reading, "We better hustle."

>Following a well-concealed trail in single file, they bounded across the uneven ground, guns at the ready. They approached a clear area, near the campus proper. Riley came to an abrupt halt, raising a staying hand and bringing the other two up short behind him.

>"Hold up." He commanded, indicating a pair of young men who were walking briskly down the sidewalk, "Found him."

>Forrest looked through a small pair of binoculars and frowned. The two were around the same age as he was, possibly college students, although no one he knew. One was tall and lean, with a crop of dark auburn hair, and moved with swift efficiency. The other, a slightly shorter, dark-haired youth kept pace beside him, talking with animated gestures. Neither seemed like a significant threat in Forrest's opinion. He had faced far more intimidating guys on the basketball court.

>Raising his stun-gun to his shoulder, Riley flicked the arming switch and took aim as the weapon hummed to life.

>"What are you doing, man?" Forrest grabbed Riley's arm and pulled the barrel of the gun down, "They're just a couple of regular guys, not demons."

>"Don't worry about it. I dampened the charge accordingly." Riley shrugged out of his friend's grip and lifted the weapon again, "My orders are for a clean capture. Now, you think you can take the one on the outside on a count of three or what?"

>"We're pulling take-downs on human targets now?" Forrest was skeptical, but obeyed slowly and took a bead on the smaller of the two targets.

>"I already told you everything I can." He lined the crosshairs up on the center of the auburn-haired young man's back, "I have my orders."

>"Save the argument for later guys." Graham interrupted, waving his detector in their faces, "We've got a hostile in the area, on a southbound heading. A big one. Matches the signature of the one we were warned about. We better find a safehouse like the Professor ordered."

>Riley hesitated, torn between two conflicting orders. His target continued down the sidewalk, moving out of range and unwittingly solving his dilemma for him. Grumbling in frustration, his switched off his weapon and let it hang from his shoulder.

>"There's one over on 63rd." His gaze wandered again to where he had last seen the two young men, "We can be there in five minutes and call this in."

>As Riley and Graham started moving, Forrest cocked his head and scowled at the readout on his monitor screen.

>"Did you say southbound?" he shook the hand-sized device and checked it again, "Mine says northbound. No, check that, now I have a southeast heading too."

>Riley pulled out his own tracker and took a quick reading.

>"They're all over the place!"

>A lone vampire with a black, triangular symbol on its forehead emerged from the trees, tall and menacing, its arms spread and teeth bared. Graham whipped his gun around and fired a bolt of electricity into the creature's chest. Bright blue veins of energy crackled around the vampire's body, bringing forth a snarl of pain, but barely slowing it.

>"Full power agents!" Riley shouted, turning the setting on his weapon all the way up, "Don't worry about toasting it."

>As the vampire closed by a few steps, Riley fired a second, fully charged blast into its chest. The beast's torso bucked from the impact, but it ignored the attack and kept coming.

>Two more vampires appeared from different directions, one large, the other spindly, both grinning with bloodthirsty hatred in their yellow eyes.

>Forrest fired a poorly aimed shot at one of the vampires and backed off cautiously.

>"Damn it, Ri," he shouted tensely, "we gotta get out of here!"

>Riley only nodded as he gave the signal to retreat and the three burst into a desperate run. The vampires hooted and howled gleefully, taking up the chase with excited energy like a pack of wolves. The blood-chilling sounds shot up the three soldiers' spines and echoed in their ears as they broke through the brush and into the open street.

>Riley ran as hard as he had ever run in his life, his legs and arms pumping with machine-like efficiency. They were closing, only a few yards behind Forrest and Graham who were less than a yard behind him. The safehouse was more than a block away, plenty of time for the vampires to close the small gap between them.

>A fourth vampire cut in front of them, appearing out of the darkness and grabbing Riley around the shoulders. Without missing a step, Riley pressed the muzzle of his gun into its stomach and pulled the trigger. There was a muffled thump and a flash of light as the creature absorbed the blast, losing its hold on Riley and tumbling to the ground. Riley hopped over the fallen creature, hissing in pain as he dropped the scalding weapon, its metal stock having overheated in the backlash of the stifled discharge.

>The vampire snarled and sat up, making a grab for Forrest, failing only when Graham smashed a heavy boot heel into its chin as he passed. Riley shot an uneasy glance over his shoulder and stepped up the pace a little more. A point-blank blast should have been enough to burn a hole clean through the vampire, but it had somehow survived the attack and was hot on their tails again.

>They rounded a corner and the safehouse came into view. Appearing on the outside to be nothing more than a small, abandoned home, Riley knew that it would be outfitted with the things they needed to survive. He rushed up the rickety, wooden steps and shoved open the door, holding it for his companions.

>"Inside!" he barked, gesturing to them, "Go!"

>Graham and Forrest both dove through the doorway, only a few feet ahead of the leadmost vampire. The creature grabbed onto Riley's vest and dragged him close, reaching for his throat with long canines.

>A burst of blue light flashed and the vampire howled in pain. Electricity surged through its body and Riley was blasted out of its grip to the floor, stunned. The instant the creature was clear of the doorway, Graham flipped open a hidden panel in the wall, exposing a small speaker.

>"Authorization Miller, Graham, identity number 79711!" he shouted into the speaker, "Initiate lockdown, now!"
 >Mechanisms within the walls whirred to life and heavy metal plates slammed down deafeningly over the windows and the door, locking into place. The metal shuddered as the vampires pounded on the barriers in rage from the outside, but it would hold for a while. The Initiative had built this safehouse to withstand a lot of punishment.

>Forrest knelt down next to Riley and helped him sit up, "You okay, man?"

>Riley gave his head a brisk shake and blinked a few times. His hair was all on end and thin smoke rose from his vest where the vampire had held him.

>"Y-yeah, I'm fine." He cleared his throat and stood unsteadily. Pacing across the dark room, he withdrew a small, cell phone from his inside pocket, "I better call this in."

>He pressed a series of numbers, patching into the Initiative's special network, and waited.

>"Special agent Riley Finn calling in a hostile alert, sector eight-G." he reported dutifully, "There are two other agents with me and a whole mess of hostiles outside. Request a suggested course of action." He paused again for a moment and nodded softly, "I see. Affirmative, Finn out."

>Forrest clasped his blaster nervously, flinching slightly every time a vampire's fist connected with a particularly loud clang against one of the steel barriers.

>"What'd they say?" he asked, wiping chill sweat from his forehead with the back of his forearm.

>"They want us to sit tight." Riley responded in a monotone voice, tiredly seating himself on the floor against the base of one of the walls, "We're supposed to hole up until the hostiles back off or daylight hits, whichever comes first."

>Graham scowled and seated himself across from Riley, propping his blaster across his lap. The pounding was not relenting and promised to continue for some time.

>"Looks like we're in for a long night."

>* * *

>Buffy sat at end of a library table, flipping idly through the pages of her psych textbook. Parker was supposed to have met her almost twenty minutes ago and he still had not shown. His help had already resulted in a B+ paper, her best all semester, and she was really depending on him to get her ready for the mid-term.

>The sound of an armload of books hitting the floor echoed, overloud in the placid library, and Xander stumbled around the corner of a bookcase.

>"Oh, um, sorry about that." He apologized to some unseen student, "I'm not really familiar yet. You know what, here let me help."

>He stooped, reaching for something, and a sharp rip cut through the library. Xander's arm jerked back holding a wide, fabric strap from the student's backpack in his hand.

>"Oh, that was all one piece?" He stared, dumbfounded at the strap, "Sorry. Maybe I should just, um, be along my merry way before you drop anything dangerous and I end up charged with homicide."

>Sheepishly, he handed the strap back to the student and turned to beat a hasty retreat.

>Buffy raised her hand and waved vigorously to get his attention.

>"Hey, Buffy!" he called excitedly, waving, then shrank from the

volume of his own voice.

>"Xander," she whispered sharply, "what are you doing here?"

>With a series of exaggerated tip-toe steps, he approached and slipped into the chair opposite her.

>"We went by the dorm and Willow said you were in here." He craned his head back to look at the ceiling, "Mighty lofty institution you got here. Sure beats the bookmobile."

>"We?" she echoed tensely, "Who's we? Xander, is he here with you?"

>"Yeah, we split up to look for you when we first came in." he grinned, "He should be around any second now."

>"You have to get him out of here." She clasped his arm tightly.

>She couldn't help but want to see Gabriel, even from an awkward distance, but the last thing she needed right now was another gut-wrenching reminder of the currently dismal state of her personal life.

>"Relax." Xander leaned back in his chair and folded his hands smugly behind his head, "I think you're going to like what he has to say."

>Buffy's eyebrows jumped. What could Gabriel have to say to her? She had no time to ponder as the auburn-haired young man rounded the corner and found them. She watched him as he crossed the study area with painful slowness, his face a mask that even she couldn't read. Stopping just a few feet short of her table, he remained standing and slipped his hands into the pockets of his tailored black pants.

>"Hey, Summers." He smiled slightly and gave a weak half-wave, his voice surprisingly soft.

>"Hey." She returned, pursing her lips and swallowing. Summers. He used to call her that during the first days of their relationship, before they were even dating. It filled her with pleasant nostalgia, a sense of remembered happiness from a time that seemed years distant, not mere months.

>Xander stood up quietly and smiled at the two of them.

>"Why don't I just wander off so you two can chat?" He squinted his eyes and read the heading on one of the tall shelves, "Catch up on my, Nee-oh-lith-ick Culture. Boy, that sounds like fun. Try not to take too long, okay."

>With false exuberance, he swaggered off and disappeared between the shelves, leaving Buffy and Gabriel alone together.

>Gabriel took the chair that Xander had vacated. Looking across the table at her, he inhaled deeply and released the breath slowly.

>Buffy watched his face anxiously. His expression was intense and his cheeks were slightly tinged with pink. There had been a time when she would have been able to read his face as plainly as a book, but at the moment, it was inscrutable. Anticipation warred with worry inside her and her stomach filled with nervous butterflies.

>"Xander said you had something to talk to me about?" she asked expectantly.

>"Yeah," He began with a nervous smile, displaying traces of the endearing boyishness that had charmed her so long ago, "I-It's kind of important."

>Reaching across the table, he brushed the tips of his fingers across the back of her hand, holding her eyes with his. The familiar warm, electric tingle that often accompanied his touch danced over her skin and her heart quickened in response.

>"Go on." She encouraged softly, wanting terribly to take his hand

fully in hers but still hesitating, unsure of his intention.

>As Gabriel opened his mouth to speak again, another young man approached her from behind.

>"Hey, sorry I'm late." Parker placed his hand on her shoulder and gave her a friendly peck on the cheek.

>Buffy's entire body went rigid and cold shock shot through her. God, of all the times for Parker to show up, why now?

>"Um, hi, Parker." She squirmed uncomfortably in her chair, "Could you wait here a sec and give me - us - a minute alone? We were kind of in the middle of something."

>"Sure, go ahead." He agreed affably, pulling a hard-cover textbook and a coil-bound notebook out of his bag and setting them on the table, "I'll get set up."

>Rising out of her chair, she gestured to Gabriel to step aside with her. He followed wordlessly, his face suddenly blank, returned to the hardness she had recently come to expect from him. Only his eyes remained full of life and intensity.

>Safely out of earshot, she tilted her head up and looked into his face.

>"You . . . were saying?" she prompted, worried by the change in his demeanor.

>He dropped his gaze to the floor, shifting from foot to foot and shaking his head softly.

>"It's nothing." He muttered, "I, um, there was just this vampire. Gave me a hard time the other night, that's all. I-I just . . . thought you should know."

>A vampire!? He had come all the way out to the campus to see her over a stupid vampire? She had allowed herself to open up and hope, only to find disappointment. Her heart turned in on itself painfully and sank into her stomach. So this was it. This was how it was going to be from now on. Co-workers. Colleagues. Nothing more. Like everything they had shared had never even existed.

>"Look, I, uh, I have to . . . go." Gabriel said, refusing to meet her gaze.

>She watched sadly as he quickly turned and headed for the exit. For the second time in her life, someone she loved had broken away from her, left her for reasons that were beyond her control. The realization sickened her and made her want to cry.

>Her insides churning, she returned numbly to her seat and sat down, folding her arms across her mid-section. Parker smiled a greeting and touched his hand softly to her shoulder.

>"Everything alright?" he asked in friendly concern.

>"Yeah, um, it's fine." She lied, every heartbeat thumping painfully against her ribs, "Just some old business. It's . . . It's over . . . now."

>"Oh, well, that's good then." He commented, "You don't look like you're feeling too good. Do you want to put this off until tomorrow?"

>She smiled appreciatively and smoothed her hair back, tucking it behind her ears. She wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or upset that her tears seemed to have gone dry.

>"Thanks, Parker. I think I could really use some rest right now." She swallowed the hard pit of pain that had formed in her chest, "Things have been kind of rough lately."

>Parker sighed and smiled at her.

>"You know, I was thinking about the Halloween bash on Friday." He mentioned, "You going?"

>"I don't think so." In fact, she was sure of it. Before today, the prospect had been questionable at best. Now, all she planned to do

for the next month was curl up in her bed and die.

>"Maybe you should." He suggested, "We can go together."

>"Whu?" she was only half-paying attention to what he was saying.

>"Yeah, it'll be great." He insisted, "We'll hang out, have a few laughs. I'm famous for being able to chase away the blues."

>She frowned in consideration. A large social gathering hardly seemed appealing, but at the same time, she dreaded the thought of being alone with her memories. Besides, it wasn't like Gabriel cared where she went or what she did with her time anymore.

>"I'll think about it, okay?" She answered, rising and slinging her books over her shoulder.

>"Sure." He agreed pleasantly, "It'll be fun, Buffy. Promise."

>* * *

>Gabriel stormed out of the library, his fists clenched at his sides and his face suffused with anger. His chest felt hollow, empty except for the sharp pain that had taken up residence there. He had entered the library reinvigorated and full of hope. And that feeling had been shattered.

>"Hey, wait up, man." Xander jogged up from behind, "Wait up!"

>Gabriel continued to stalk silently through the building in straight, efficient lines.

>"Hey," Xander caught up and kept pace, jogging sideways and facing his friend, "That doesn't look like the face of love reclaimed. What happened?"

>"Who is he, Xander?" the auburn-haired young man demanded.

>"Who, that guy?" Xander's forehead creased, "I don't know. Some prissy college guy that's supposed to be helping her out with one of her classes, I think."

>"Looks like he was helping himself to me." He grumbled darkly, "He's trouble, I can feel it. I don't like him."

>Gabriel shoved the door wide on his way outside and Xander swiftly grabbed the handle to keep the glass from shattering against the wall.

>"No kidding." He observed wryly, "And here I thought this bout of irrational anger was coming straight out of left field."

>Gabriel's jaw tightened and his mouth turned down. He had to force air into his lungs and try to keep his emotions under control. His eyes were misting up, betraying him, and he turned his face away to hide it from Xander.

>"Why didn't you tell me she found someone new?"

>The broken tone of his voice brought Xander up short. He stopped dead in his tracks and stared as Gabriel kept walking.

>"Someone new?" he gaped, "Whoa, hold on a sec. Did I miss something?"

>"I think we both did. I'm going home."

>"And then what?"

>Gabriel turned sharply and stormed down a well-worn trail, disappearing into the shaded brush.

>"I guess I'm going to have to get on with my life."

>* * *

>A short knock sounded at Forrest's door, stirring him from a pleasant dream. He ignored it, hoping that it would go away. The

knock sounded again and, rolling tiredly, he groaned and pulled his pillow tightly over his head.

>"Go away!" he grumbled in annoyance.

>The knocker ignored the command and whispered secretively from the other side of the door.

>"Forrest, get up." Riley instructed insistently, "We've gotta go."

>"Go where?" Forrest moaned, hugging his blankets possessively around himself and checking his bedside clock. The numbers read five-fourteen, "Take a hike, Riley."

>"I'm not joking around here, Gates." Riley replied in a harsh whisper, "Open up."

>Forrest rolled out from under his sheets, rubbing tiredly at his eyes and covering a gaping yawn with his hand. He reached out blindly, his eyes closed, and gave the doorknob a sharp twist, pausing only long enough to pull it open a few inches before toppling back onto his bed.

>Riley rushed inside and shut the door behind him.

>"Come on, Forrest, we don't have time for this." He urged, giving the bedframe a solid kick.

>Forrest bucked, but refused to move, desperately holding on to the last vestiges of his dream.

>Frustrated, Riley snapped on the overhead light, assaulting the room with harsh radiance.

>Forrest curled up into a ball, shielding his sensitive eyes from the brightness.

>"It's amazing that you have any friends at all, you know that?" he scowled tiredly and sat up on the edge of his bed, blinking and shaking his head to clear it.

>Riley was dressed in his fatigues, sans patrol equipment, standing impatiently by the door in a tense at-ease posture.

>"This isn't a social call." he reached into Forrest's bottom drawer and pulled out a khaki Initiative uniform, tossing it into his lap, "Professor Walsh wants us front and center in fifteen minutes."

>Forrest just stared at the uniform for a moment, uncomprehending.

>"What's going on?" he asked, unfolding his pants and struggling to pull them on.

>"I don't know." Riley shrugged, "My beeper went off fifteen minutes ago and I came right here. Why didn't you hear yours?"

>Forrest sighed and pushed his arms through the sleeves of his jacket, turning the motion into a full, bone-rattling stretch.

>"I think I was busy shooting next year's Sport's Illustrated swimsuit edition." He rubbed his bald head, looking longingly one last time at his bed, and zipped up the front of his jacket, "Until you came along, that is."

>"The models will have to wait." Riley grabbed him by the arm and steered him into the hallway, "The Professor outranks them."

>The pair made their way to the secret elevator entrance to the Initiative's underground complex and waited patiently for the identification procedure to grant them access. As the mirror slid up into the ceiling and the elevator doors opened, Graham came running around the corner, barefoot, wearing jeans and a T-shirt with socks and shoes gathered in his hands.

>"Hold the door." He called breathlessly, tramping haphazardly into the elevator. Once inside, he leaned against the back wall to catch

his breath.

>Riley looked him over curiously.

>"Wearing civvies to a priority one meeting?" he observed wryly, "You're getting brave."

>"No time to get my uniform." Graham apologized between gasping breaths while standing on one foot and pulling a sock on, "I wasn't home."

>Forrest grinned broadly and clapped his friend proudly on the back.

>"Well, well, well, while some of us were only dreaming, Graham here was living the reality." He lifted his eyebrows, his dark eyes glittering with interest, "Lemme guess, Carrol from Stevenson? What was a high-maintenance chick like her doing with a lug like you?"

>"Probably nothing after this." Graham lamented as he tied up his sneakers, "I had to tell her that it was my Mom beeping me so she'd let me go. And she was NOT pleased."

>"No kidding." Forrest chuckled, "You spend the night with her and then jet because you hear your Mommy calling you? How could a girl not take THAT as a compliment? Damn, Miller, you gotta learn how to lie better."

>The elevator came to a halt and the doors opened into the main complex. As they had expected, Professor Walsh was waiting for them, but, to their surprise, no other agents appeared to be present. Instantly, all three straightened into an attentive posture.

>"Good morning, gentlemen." She greeted, "I trust you've all had a good night's rest after the safehouse incident?"

>Graham shifted uneasily as she seemed to direct the question specifically at him. Fortunately, Riley intervened.

>"Why are we the only ones here, Professor?" he asked, "Is there some emergency?"

>She turned her attention away from Graham and regarded Riley seriously.

>"How have you been doing on finding our vigilante?" She asked, beginning to pace in a tight, efficient circle while studying the worn clipboard that seemed to be a perpetual part of her wardrobe.

>"Vigilante?" Forrest cocked his head curiously.

>Riley's orders had specified that he could conscript other agents to help him with his objective, but the specific details of the mission were to remain secret. He had only told his two companions what had been necessary.

>"They don't know." He informed her.

>Professor Walsh nodded approvingly.

>"Then it's time that they did, but I'll leave it to you to explain later." She stated, stopping and facing all three young men, "I read your report on the incident with Hostile Prime last night, Riley. In light of the attack, priority on your special mission has been upgraded. If you get another opportunity like that, I want you to capitalize."

>He frowned in consideration. Ferreting out the vigilante promised to be a difficult task and his results so far had been better than even he had anticipated. But the professor still seemed dissatisfied. What could be so important as to require the completion of his mission so soon, especially considering the recent development with Hostile Prime?

>"I came close to tagging him last night before the attack." He reported, "It shouldn't be long before I get another shot."

>"See that you do." She nodded curtly, "The future of our entire operation may depend on it. I'm assuming that I need not remind you that security is of utmost importance with this mission, for both you and your subordinates."

>"Not a problem, Professor." Riley assured her confidently.

>She fixed each of them with her usual steady stare, finishing with Riley and placing a hand on his shoulder.

>"I need results, Agent Finn." She smiled, her voice carrying a note of the utmost esteem, "I know I can count on you."

>* * *

>That night, Buffy waited outside the doors to the crowded auditorium with her long coat wrapped tightly around her. There was no way it was coming off until she was safely indoors where it was relatively dark.

>Willow and Oz were supposed to be here by now. What could be keeping them? And what about Xander and Anya?

>A green-faced witch with a pointed, black hat approached her and tapped her on the shoulder.

>"Willow?" she attempted to peer through the eyeholes of the rubber mask.

>A furry werewolf came up beside the witch and placed an arm around its companion's waist, flashing Buffy a cheery wave.

>"Hey," the werewolf greeted in Willow's voice.

>Buffy frowned in confusion as the witch removed its mask, revealing Oz underneath.

>"We kinda thought it would be cool to trade for a night." He smirked, "You know, walk a mile in the other's shoes?"

>"Very original." Buffy congratulated the two, "Nice to see you back, Oz. Where's Xander?"

>The werewolf turned around a few times looking behind herself.

>"I don't know." Willow spread her hands helplessly, "They were right behind us."

>Xander staggered around the corner, fidgeting and squirming within the confines of a white straitjacket, his hair a wild and tangled mess. Anya walked beside him in a long, pale, sheath dress adorned with egyptian-style costume jewelry, rolling her eyes in exasperation. Xander stopped struggling as they approached and smiled weakly.

>"Mental patient." Buffy observed, looking him over blithely, "Fitting."

>"It's all I could dig up. Look, I was supposed to be Jar-Jar Binks, but all the costumes were gone by the time I got to the rental shop. Rotten little kids." He muttered petulantly, then straightened to quell any impending questions, "And DON'T ask where I got the straitjacket. Let's just say my uncle Roary had to go away for a 'rest' a few years ago and that's all you need to know."

>Buffy raised her hands in surrender while Oz eyed Anya's costume curiously.

>"Pharaoh's daughter?" he asked.

>"No." she frowned indignantly, "Cleopatra. Do you have any idea the number she pulled on Julius Caesar and Marc Antony? She's, like, one of my idols."

>"Everyone," Xander declared with mock pride, "the girl with the big hate on for men? My date. Yep, all mine."

>He looked at Buffy with a mildly disapproving expression.

>"Willow tells me you're meeting someone here." He queried dryly, "So

where is this home-wrecker?"

>"Parker." She alluded tensely, "And don't give me any problems over this Xander, please? He's really a nice guy. I need that now."

>Xander backed down in shame.

>"Sorry, Buff." He apologized, "I didn't mean to make with the guilt trip. I just don't think it's a good idea, I mean you should be with—" he stopped when he saw the corners of her mouth start to turn down and raised his hands, "Right. Sorry. Again."

>"I know your heart was in the right place, Xander." she smiled forgiveness, "Even if your mouth wasn't. What do you say we chalk it up to water under the bridge and go inside?"

>Buffy pulled the door open and held it while the others went inside. It was warm and dark within and the air smelled faintly of pumpkin pie. Upbeat music pulsed and thumped in a relentless rhythm, overlaying a second track of cheesy Halloween screams and wails. She allowed the door to close behind her and looked around. Wow, there were a lot of people there. Costumes ranged from the impressive to the incomprehensible and it seemed like nothing was original.

>Long black and orange banners hung from the ceiling and the walls were adorned with fake cobwebs and rubber spiders. Plastic skeletons wrapped in toilet paper languished against the refreshment table where a large bowl filled with blood-colored punch sat in the center of a mock corpse's hollow chest.

>"Hey look, skeleton cookies." Willow piped happily, sticking her wolf mask under her arm and picking up a shortbread in the shape of a rib cage, "Oh, and little gummi-intestines! This is so festive!"

>"So, Buff," Xander shrugged, the most expressive body movement he could manage, "Do you actually have a costume under that thing or are we going for the secret service spy look?" He looked down at her feet and frowned in confusion, "With red boots?"

>"Yeah, I got a costume." She admitted quietly, tugging the front of her coat more tightly closed.

>"So?" he raised his eyebrows expectantly, "Are you going to keep us in suspense or what?"

>"I figured it might be a good idea in case Ethan Rayne tried to pull the same stunt he did two years ago, but I didn't get a look at it until it was too late." She sighed, "Please, don't laugh."

>Opening the front of her coat a little, she exposed a tight blue body suit emblazoned with a triangular red and yellow 'S' symbol across the chest.

>"Supergirl?" Xander cocked his head, looking her over, "What's so embarrassing about that? I mean it's kind of appropriate when you think - whoa!" his jaw dropped as his eyes wandered to the lower portion of the costume, "Where did you get the bottom half? The 'Little Miss' department?"

>"Very funny." Buffy tugged the hem of the red skirt down self-consciously, "It didn't look this short on the package. By the time I opened it, I was stuck."

>"You won't hear any complaints from me." Xander grinned, wide-eyed. Behind him Anya pursed her lips and growled warningly. Immediately, his smile dropped and he became subdued.

>"That's it." Buffy reclosed her coat and tied the belt tightly around her waist, "I'm am definitely going incognito tonight." A wave of murmurs ran through the crowd and the sea of people rippled as all heads turned curiously toward the auditorium entrance.

>"What's going on?" Xander craned his neck and attempted to peer over the mass of party-goers, "Is it a fight? Man, I hope it's that guy who took my ticket, stuck-up college boy."

>"Oh, my gosh!" Willow pressed a furry paw to her mouth, "Is that . . . ?"

>"Gabriel . . . ?" Buffy gasped, dumbstruck.

>The Seventh Son entered the room dressed in the apparel of a gladiator, his chest bare save for two wide leather straps crossed over his pectorals. He had a pair of brown sandals laced up the length of his muscled calves and leather pants of the same color that reached to his knees. A set of glossy black wings flowed majestically down from his shoulders, swaying softly and falling just short of the floor.

>Buffy recognized parts of his costume, particularly the cape-like wings, as being from the extensive collection of trophies he had kept from his travels. He looked like an angel, just like in her dream. A dark, fallen angel.

>Gabriel turned before seeing them and wandered into the crowd, out of sight and Xander cleared his throat uncomfortably.

>"Oh, uh, yeah." He smiled apologetically, "I sort of told Gabriel about the bash."

>Buffy turned on him, outrage on her face.

>"You TOLD him?!" she whispered sharply, "I can't believe you told him."

>"Um, well, invited would probably be a better word for it." He ducked his head sheepishly, "I made a stop at Kinko's with my ticket and, voila, reasonable facsimile. It seemed like a good idea at the time, honest."

>Willow frowned at him in disapproval.

>"Xander, you've done some thoughtless things before, but this?"

>Willow knew the facts of what had happened to Gabriel's brother, she had been there at the end, but she still couldn't figure out how he could have turned away from Buffy like he did. True, having no siblings of her own, she was hardly an expert on filial relations, but Raphael was dead and Buffy was still living. And hurting.

>"Now hold on there a minute." Xander returned her expression with a touch of annoyance, "Gabriel's here to keep an eye out for trouble. And in case you forgot, he's still a friend. One of mine, at least."

>"But, well, he's . . ." Willow inhaled a breath and sighed, shamed.

>"Xander's probably right, Will." Buffy intoned softly, "We're both grown-ups. We should be able to get through an entire night without any problems. After all, the auditorium's pretty big." Inside, however, she wasn't so sure. The room seemed to be rapidly closing in on her from all sides all of a sudden.

>A young man approached through the crowd dressed in a tuxedo with a red-lined cape and half a white mask covering one side of his face.

>"Hey." Parker greeted, taking hold of Buffy's fingers with a white-gloved hand and bowing gracefully.

>"Hi." She smiled at him, startled, but accepting the contact.

>Behind her, Xander and Willow exchanged worried glances but said nothing.

>"You been here long?" he leaned in close enough to be heard clearly.

>"Not really, we just came in." She answered, "What about you?"

>"Me and the guys have been hanging out for a while." He smiled, "It's pretty cool, huh? Wanna go dance?"

>She peered around, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. Gabriel was out there somewhere, close. She didn't want to risk letting him see her with Parker and upsetting him. Then she stopped, remembering the scene in the library. Gabriel's feelings weren't her responsibility anymore. He had made that painfully clear. Even tonight, the only reason he had shown up at the bash was because Xander had implied that there might be trouble. Seeing her had not been a consideration.

>"Sure." She agreed, forcing herself to seem happy. She turned and waved shortly to her friends, "See you guys in a bit."

>Trailing after Parker, she slipped into the crowd and was lost on the dance floor.

>The instant they were gone, Anya circled around Xander and gripped his hand, tugging him along with her.

>"I'm bored." She pouted, nipping playfully at his chin with her lips, "I met your friends at the door like I promised. Now, let's go find someplace where we can be alone."

>"Umm . . ." he hesitated, looking to Willow.

>She nodded reassuringly and waved him off.

>"Go ahead." She told him, taking Oz's hand, "We'll watch out for Buffy."

>"Sure. I'll keep my eyes open anyway. Just in case." He replied, allowing Anya to drag him away.

>Across the auditorium, Riley slipped off the tin helmet of his knight's costume and set it on a nearby empty table. Next to him, Forrest was dressed in long brown and white robes with a wide, black belt encircling his waist. Riley looked him over and raised his eyebrows judiciously.

>"You should have dressed in something with more mobility." He advised, "Any trouble comes up tonight and you'll be tripping all over yourself."

>"This is Mace Windu, man." Forrest spread his arms, displaying the robes proudly, "He's a totally stylin' Jedi. And don't worry about me if it comes to go time, you're the one wearing the stainless steel suit."

>Riley smiled and gently shook his head.

>"All breakaway pieces." He tapped his metal breastplate with a tin gauntlet, "I can be in full fatigues and armed in thirty seconds. What about you?"

>Forrest smiled broadly and pressed his robes tightly against his chest, displaying the distinct outline of a stun blaster underneath.

>"Way ahead of you, Finn."

>"Good. Where's Graham?"

>"He's got the north end." Forrest chuckled.

>He pointed across the room to the refreshment table where a tall figure in a bloodstained blue jumpsuit with a rusty machete tied at his waist and a battered goalie mask sitting atop his head was busily stuffing his face with crackers and cheese.

>"Glad to see he's staying on top of things." Riley observed dryly, "You better take the south end. I'll keep watch here."

>Forrest shrugged slightly.

>"You really think our boy's going to show up tonight, Ri?"

>"Why not?" Riley scanned the crowd carefully with intense blue eyes,

"Halloween's always a slow night for demons and this is the biggest party around. Vampire hunter's got to take time off sometime."

>Forrest smiled sardonically and patted his friend on the shoulder, "Some of them, maybe. But you can't really blame the guy for wanting to socialize with some of UC Sunnydale's fine female population."

>His head turned of its own accord, following a young lady in a filmy angel's costume with interest.

>"Guess I'll hit my post." He turned after the girl with a smile and gestured absently to Riley, "Beep ya if I pick up anything."

>"Yeah, I bet you will."

>Riley watched as he sauntered off confidently into the crowd, pausing from time to time to flirt with an attractive girl or two on the way to his position. Once he was out of sight, the sandy-haired young man held a small electronic device covertly down by his thigh and ducked his head to take a reading. The image on the small, digital screen matched the pattern of the vigilante that Professor Walsh had warned him about at the briefing. Tilting the device first one way, then the other, he smiled. Just as he had anticipated, the source of the signal was here at the bash, somewhere in the crowd.

>Adjusting the plastic sword at his waist and slinging the toy shield over his shoulder, he took a step forward, following the indicator on his detector.

>He rested his hand on the beeper attached to his belt, Graham and Forrest would have to be notified. Hopefully, together, the three of them could separate the vigilante from the other students before attempting to capture him. Glancing down at the detector once more, he froze, frowning in confusion. He cast a quick look from side to side to make sure that no one was watching and gave the detector a sharp blow with the heel of his hand.

>"Piece of junk!" he hissed in irritation, shaking the device and giving it another whack.

>Sighing in disgust, he shoved it back into his pocket and leaned back against the wall. The thing had to have been broken. Why else would it be picking up two separate identical signals?

>* * *

>Buffy drifted slow and silent in Parker's arms, listening to the soft music with her head resting against his shoulder. The closeness was comforting, but it didn't feel right. Parker's shape was wrong and his arms were wrapped tightly around her waist instead of gently enfolding her entire torso the way she was used to. He even smelled different, a scent of expensive cologne that seemed coarse and unnatural to her.

>But Parker was with her, as opposed to the one who was not, and that was what was important now. He held her and cared for her when she needed it most. To him, at least, she was still important.

>"Why don't you take off your coat?" he suggested softly in her ear, smiling and tugging at the belt tied around her mid-section, "You must be getting hot."

>"Um, no," She smiled self-consciously, taking the ends of the belt from his hands and retying them, "no, I'm fine. A little chilly even. Must be a draft or something in here."

>Parker smiled confidently and stroked his fingers through her hair.

>"So why don't we get out of here, go somewhere a little warmer." His blue eyes glittered with interest, "More private."

>Buffy didn't really feel like leaving, but she was unsure. Parker had been so kind to her, despite her less than joyous moods lately, and she wanted to return the favor for a change. What could be the harm in spending a little time alone with him?

>He offered her his arm and she took it, allowing him to guide her off the dance floor toward the exit. As they slowly made their way through the press, Buffy spotted a familiar face through the crowd and stopped dead in her tracks.

>Gabriel sat alone at a table against the wall, staring glumly into the depths of a paper cup filled with blood-colored punch. She was secretly relieved to see that he was by himself and not entertaining the attentions of any of her fellow female students. She didn't know what she would do if she saw him with someone else. It was surprising that he was alone though, considering his natural rapport with people and the fact that he had attracted so much attention upon his entrance.

>As if in answer to her thought, a slim young woman dressed in a form-fitting black and white cat costume slipped into the seat opposite him and tossed long blonde hair over one shoulder with a careless flick of her head.

>Although Buffy did not know the girl personally, she was familiar with her unsavory reputation. Practically every guy at Wolf house had a Jeanette Simmons story or two, some had more. A lot more.

>Reaching across the table, Jeanette stroked her fingers appreciatively along the soft feathers of one of Gabriel's wings, a warm smile of invitation on her painted lips, looking like the proverbial cat about to swallow the canary.

>Buffy's breath caught in her throat and a sharp stab of jealousy rose within her.

>"What's the matter?" Parker asked, stepping into her line of sight and blocking it.

>"Um, bathroom," she blurted, craning her neck to peer around his shoulder and keep an eye on Jeanette. The girl appeared to already be going through the opening motions of her well-known licentious pattern, "I, uh, I have to . . . go to the bathroom."

>"You know, there's a bathroom in my dorm you can use." Parker raised his eyebrows and gently urged her toward the door.

>Buffy pushed away his hands and ducked around him, making a straight line for Gabriel.

>"I'll just be a minute." She promised over her shoulder, "Wait here, I'll be right back."

>The crowd was thick, but she was driven and made less of an effort than usual not to bruise her fellow students. Burrowing through the multitude of people, she made quick progress toward her destination.

>As she neared the edge of the dancefloor she found Willow dancing with Oz, her head resting against his shoulder. The redhead looked up as Buffy approached and smiled a greeting.

>"Hey, Buffy, what's up?"

>Buffy paused, her attention divided.

>"Hey." She replied, peering past her through the crowd, attempting to catch sight of Gabriel again. She found him still sitting at the table with the cat-costumed girl, in the midst of guarded conversation. Buffy winced and anger flared hotly within her as Jeanette placed her hand over his, eliciting a slight smile from him.

>"Are you okay?" Willow asked, watching the intense expression on her face.

>"Hold my coat." Buffy boldly ripped open her overcoat, tossing it

into Willow's arms and letting her short, red cape ripple behind her. She pushed through the last of the crowd and broke out into the open, directly in front of Gabriel's table.

>"Oh, hi." She greeted casually, stopping suddenly as if she had only just noticed him, "I didn't think I'd see you here."
 >Gabriel froze when he saw her and the smile fell from his face.

>"H-hi." He stammered uneasily, rising quickly to his feet and forgetting about his conversation companion.

>The long, black wings on his back flared slightly, the soft feathers rustling in reaction to his sharp movement. At the table, Jeanette frowned skeptically up at her and preened the tiny cat ears atop her head.

>"I, uh, I thought this might be a good place to keep an eye out." Gabriel paused, glancing covertly at the seated girl for an instant, "Because of the, um, that thing I told you about."

>She understood his evasiveness. Talking about work-related issues in the presence of civilians was never easy. Sharing this secret knowledge with him, she couldn't help but feel a little superior to the other girl.

>"I like your costume." Gabriel smiled weakly, "Who are you supposed to be?"

>"You don't know?" Buffy blinked in surprise, "Supergirl? You know, it's a bird? It's a plane?" she sighed when his face remained blankly uncomprehending, "I really should have made more of a point of introducing you to American culture when we . . . were . . ."

>She stopped, seeing no point in finishing the sentence. They both knew what she had been going to say.

>"Well, it's nice." He looked her over a trifle shyly and smiled faintly, "Very, um . . . short."

>Buffy scowled at the comment, but straightened her back and turned a quarter turn to make her bare, supple legs look as long as possible.

>"Yours isn't too bad, either." She allowed, "But something tells me you didn't pick it up at a local corner store."

>"No." he agreed quietly, looking down and fingering a few feathers, "Hunted down a rogue manticore in Thailand a couple of years ago. When it was all over, Uncle Phillip let me keep the wings."

>"I see." She pursed her lips.

>They stood in uncomfortable silence, intensely aware of one another, yet unable to maintain eye contact.

>Growing impatient, Jeanette stood up from the table and promptly left, looking disgusted. Buffy followed her with her eyes for a moment before turning back to Gabriel.

>"Looks like your little friend got bored." She commented more cattily than she had intended.

>Gabriel folded his bare arms tightly across his chest and leaned back against the edge of the table, his green eyes narrowing.

>"But I see your friend is still waiting." He noted bitterly, nodding slightly in the direction of the exit where Parker paced back and forth patiently in a slow circuit.

>Buffy's jaw dropped in surprise and she found herself suddenly on the defensive.

>"Oh, that's . . . um, that's just Parker." She told him uncomfortably, "My, um . . . my tutor."

>"Yeah, I remember from the library." He said with a trace of disapproval in his voice, "I just didn't expect you to . . ." he

stopped and looked away from her, shaking his head regretfully, "Nevermind."

>"What?" she frowned suddenly, "What weren't you expecting?"

>He released a tired sigh and uncrossed his arms.

>"I don't know." He said, his voice sounding strained and hurt, "I guess I just didn't think you'd find someone else so soon."

>"Someone else?!" she blurted, outraged, "Parker is not-! Besides, you're the one that wanted it this way."

>"You're wrong. I never wanted this." He said, stepping close to her with sadness in his eyes, "But it's too late now."

>Buffy stared, transfixed, her jaw quivering with barely-checked emotion. She could feel him, the gentle tickle of a thousand soft-tipped needles brushing against the surface of her skin. The familiar sensation took her breath away and brought back a hundred heart-touching memories. For a brief moment, she almost forgot the gulf that had come between them. But it was no comfort. It hurt even more to be reminded of what she had lost.

>"I-I'm going to go now." she muttered, dropping her gaze to the floor and turning back into the crowd, "Have a good night."

>Gabriel reached out to her and took a step forward, his face stricken, "Buffy, wait . . ."

>She left him behind, weaving deftly through the crowd, her lungs and throat tight with emotion. She found Willow and Oz at a table away from the dance floor, sitting near to one another with the comfortable closeness of familiar lovers. A touch of envy added itself to the confusing mix of feelings whirling inside her, followed by an equal measure of resulting guilt.

>"I need my jacket." Buffy informed them shortly, "I'm leaving."

>Willow jumped to her feet with Buffy's coat folded over her arms, "Why? What happened?"

>"I don't want to talk about it." She answered sullenly, reaching for her coat, "I'm just going to go home."

>Willow exchanged a concerned look with Oz and took his hand in hers.

>"Hold on." She suggested, "We'll go with you. Just give us a minute to find Xander and Anya and tell them we're going."

>"You don't have to do that, guys." She smiled appreciatively, "I just need some time. I'll be fine."

>"It's cool." Oz assured her, holding up the rubber witch's mask in his hand, "I was getting sick of the smell of poly-styrene anyway."

>He unconsciously wrapped an arm around Willow's waist and guided her ahead of him in a single file line.

>"We'll go look for the other two and meet you back here."

>Buffy nodded in agreement, "Thanks. I really appreciate this."

>* * *

>Michael crouched behind a pair of tall, young men, peering through the narrow space between them. He was dressed all in black, as he often was, and his head was shaven clean, pale and smooth. A faint, pink stain surrounded his mouth and his nose had become wider and somewhat flattened, bat-like. These mild physical changes meant nothing, a small price to pay in exchange for the incredible power that was now his. A small price to pay for the girl that would soon be his as well.

>He watched her wandering through the crowd in the company of the vile werewolf and anger burned within him. The disgusting beast didn't deserve to even be near her. Michael glided easily through the gathered people, prowling after the pair and keeping them in view, his eyes greedily locked on her.

>A sharp stabbing pain lanced through his head and he clapped his hands to the sides of his skull, crying out.

>*The girl is not important!* the Master's voice thundered angrily.

>Michael gasped and stumbled against a table.

>"Ugh, why do you have to DO that?" he hissed in annoyance, "It's not like I can't hear you."

>A number of young party-goers took notice as he muttered one half of a conversation to himself, but he ignored their judgmental stares.

>*The Slayer is here.* the voice returned, *She must be our first concern.*

>"Our servants are already awaiting our command." He reminded the ancient vampire, "But the attack can't begin until I convince Willow to leave with me."

>*Forget about the witch.*

>"I can't!" he snapped, slinking into a more secluded corner to avoid prying eyes and ears, "I'm tired of serving your ends and getting nothing in return. Willow is mine, rightfully mine, and I won't help you any more until I get her!"

>The Master's consciousness considered this strange new development with his host curiously. So far, the boy had been easily managed, traipsing blindly after a worthless carrot dangling before his nose. But apparently his hunger had overgrown his prudence and he was becoming too confident in his newfound power.

>If the Master had possessed a body of his own, he would have crushed the boy like the inconsequential gnat that he was. But that was not the case for the moment. A different tactic would be required to deal with him. For the moment, at least.

>*You want to impress this girl with your power, don't you?* he asked, his nether-voice warming with honeyed tones, *Imagine how great you will seem to her when she sees you at the command of a conquering army? A leader?*

>Michael smiled in spite of himself, his mind awash in visions of glory. Before the night was over, he would take her, show her how powerful he had become. He would make her a queen, a goddess even, to sit at his side. How could a woman possibly refuse him?

>A young girl with long, straight blonde hair appeared next to him from the shadows, wearing a voluminous pink dress and holding a foil-wrapped baton topped with a silver star in her hand.

>"Okay, dork, I've been here for, like, an hour already." She moaned in exasperation, "When do I get to start killing people?"

>Michael's eyes narrowed in annoyance, the sound of her voice grating on his nerves, but he didn't turn to look at her. Back in high school, he had always hated Harmony and her elitist attitude. He could hardly believe it when she had turned out to be one of the vampires who had answered the Master's mental summons. While the spell that made her into a Vessel also bound her to his will, it could do nothing to curb her insolent tongue. And undeath only seemed to have made her into an even more insufferable airhead.

>"You should have more respect." He warned her irritably, "I am your master."

>"Alright then, MASTER dork." She rolled her eyes and adjusted the

glittering tiara atop her head, squinting into a silvered banner in search of a reflection that was not there, "I let you draw this stupid triangle on my head. When do I get to see if it works?"

>"When I say so." He snapped, "The time isn't right yet."

>Harmony slumped back against the wall, blowing out a long, frustrated breath.

>"But I'm so BOOORED!" she complained, "You are SUCH a loser, just like in high school. You've got all this power and you're too scared to use it."

>Her words struck a nerve and he straightened in outrage. He could kill her with barely a moment's thought, grind her into the ground and smash that smug mouth into pulp. But, as much as he hated to admit it, she was right.

>He had waited long enough. If he was to get what he wanted, he would have to reach out and take it.

>"Maybe you're right." he whispered lustily, reaching out with his mind to touch those of his vampire servants who were scattered throughout the crowd, "It's time to call out the troops."

>* * *

>Xander grinned and kissed Anya, closing the closet door behind him with his foot. He stumbled unsteadily in the dark as she gave a low, hungry growl and spun him around, shoving him back against the edge of a fold-up table. Squirming within the confines of his straitjacket, he nudged his face against her cheek.

>"Anya," he grunted, twisting his arms awkwardly in the sleeves, "g-gimme a minute . . . I gotta . . get out of this thing."

>"Uh-uh." She took hold of his head in her hands, jerking him forward into another rough kiss and stilling his arms, "Keep it on. I like it."

>He lifted his eyebrows in bemusement and barely had time to inhale a quick breath before she had his mouth again. He groaned pleasantly, impressed by her aggressiveness.

>As she fumbled with the buttons on his pants, groping blindly, the table bucked under him.

>Xander frowned, peering over her shoulder into the dark.

>"What was that?" he asked tensely.

>Anya sighed, sliding her warm tongue up the side of his neck.

>"Who cares?" she murmured into his ear, stroking her fingers across his chest.

>He grinned, flinching pleasantly as she bit down on his earlobe, and surrendered to her insistent ministrations. Tilting his head back, he closed his eyes and relaxed within the bounds of the tight straitjacket. The table bucked again and Xander's eyes popped open in alarm, darting back and forth, wide in the gloom.

>"Okay, as much as I'd like to think that I'm moving the world for you, even I'm not that dense." He tried to push her back, "There's someone under the table."

>"So what? Let them watch." she shoved him back, holding him against the table, and smiled, the tip of her nose touching his, "I kinda like that, too."

>His jaw sagged open in awe and she caught his lower lip between her teeth, tugging on it playfully.

>Underneath the table, a pair of luminous yellow eyes opened and a fanged mouth leered.

>* * *

>Gabriel leaned his feathered wings against a wall and folded his arms across his chest. After the encounter with Buffy, he had slunk away to be alone. When Xander had mentioned the bash, he had agreed to come, claiming to be on the lookout for vampires. Truthfully, he had just wanted to be near her on the off chance that somehow everything between them would just fix itself. But things hadn't gone the way that he had hoped. His brow furrowed in thought and he let his mind begin to wander, to focus on something other than the pain.

>As always though, his mental musings followed a well-tread path. The pain led him to think of Raphael. Raphael led him to think of vampires. And vampires led him to think of Buffy. She was gone now, as far out of his reach as the stars in the sky. He had foolishly let her slip away from him and she had gone to the arms of another.

>A vaguely familiar voice reached his ears through the din of music and people.

>"I'm telling you, guys," the voice said, "This Summers chick is ripe for the taking. This is going to be my fastest conquest ever."

>Gabriel turned his head to see a group of young men dressed in varied costumes, chuckling and laughing around the speaker, a young man in the costume of the Phantom of the Opera. It was Parker, the one who had kissed Buffy in the library. The one who was going to hurt her.

>Eyes narrowed dangerously, Gabriel approached him from behind and grabbed him roughly by the shoulder, spinning him around.

>"What the-?" Parker scowled in annoyance.

>"I heard what you said about Buffy." Gabriel barked in the other boy's face, cutting his exclamation off.

>"Who?" Parker frowned in confusion, then broke into a cocky smile, "Oh yeah, you're the boyfriend, aren't you?" his grin grew wider, cruel, "Ex-boyfriend."

>"Leave her alone." Gabriel warned, his voice low and threatening.

>"Give me a break." Parker snorted derisively, "You dumped her man, your loss."

>He sneered over his shoulder to his buddies and they flanked him supportively. Crossing his arms confidently over his chest, he fixed Gabriel with an arrogant smirk.

>"I don't know what you did to her, pal, but it sure is making my job easy." He leered, "I'd say within a week, I'll have her doing things she never would have imagined when she was with you. She looks limber."

>Gabriel's hands shook with barely-controlled anger, but he restrained himself. Parker was only trying to goad him, to manipulate him the way he was manipulating Buffy.

>"The trick is sympathy." The dark-haired young man continued smugly, "Get a girl's sympathy and her panties are sure to follow. Gave her a sappy story about being traumatized over my dead father. Works every time."

>Dead father. Gabriel's father had died horribly before his very eyes. Without thought, his hands shot out and grabbed two tight fistfuls of Parker's costume, slamming him back against the wall and holding him there with lung-jarring force. He glared balefully at the young man, his lip curled in anger and his fists pressing hard as stones against his chest.

>Parker's friends moved to assist him, but he waved them off, his cocky smile still firmly in place.

>"What are you going to do? Hit me?" he coughed around a laugh, "Go ahead. Buffy will be kissing every bruise and anything else if I want her to. Who do you think she'll believe? Her psycho, jealous ex-boyfriend or sweet, understanding Parker?"

>Gabriel's jaw clenched and trembled angrily. Parker was right. Knocking his teeth in would only exacerbate Buffy's problem, no matter how satisfying it might feel. He would have to find another way to protect her. Grudgingly, he stepped back and released Parker, forcefully shoving the young man away from him in frustration.

>Parker stumbled a few feet and straightened, confidently smoothing the wrinkles out of the lapels of his costume.

>"Face it townie, you're outclassed." He sneered arrogantly, "I've done this a ton of times, I know every aspect of the game."

>Gabriel's face became stern with defeat, but then his gold-on-green eyes focused on a point just beyond Parker's shoulder and filled with ironic mirth.

>Someone tapped Parker sharply on the shoulder from behind and he whirled in surprise.

>Cocking her head, Buffy glared up at him with angry fire in her eyes.

>"I've got a new aspect for you, Parker." She bared her teeth threateningly and balled her hand into a fist, "Right here."

>A high-pitched, womanly scream cut through the room, louder and far more chilling than anything the bash's cheesy soundtrack had to offer. Buffy's head snapped up and her eyebrows stitched together in confusion.

>"Xander?" she scowled, watching him bolt fearfully through the crowd, unbalanced within the binding straitjacket. Anya trailed after him, hastily pulling her long gown back together while sprinting to keep up with Xander. Behind her, a tall, muscled vampire bounded out of an open storage closet and snarled with predatory confidence. Coming up next to it, a smaller vampire garbed all in black grinned lustily.

>Simultaneously, both Buffy and Gabriel forgot about Parker and ran straight for the vampires. The taller creature abandoned its attack on a terrified male student and turned toward the oncoming challenge, welcoming it with open arms and a fanged smile.

>Acting instinctively, Buffy dropped low into a footsweep while Gabriel leaped over her and snapped a kick into the creature's chest. The vampire hit the floor and rolled to its feet, diving for Buffy. She bounced up, spinning away, directly across Gabriel's path, and smashed her fist across the small vampire's jaw. The other vampire grabbed for her, giving Gabriel a perfect opening on their opponent's throat. He capitalized quickly, landing a solid chop to the underside of its chin and ducking back out of its reach before it could retaliate.

>Buffy circled behind her adversary, whipping her foot around into a powerful heel kick, her shiny red boot connecting solidly with the back of the vampire's head. The thing stumbled forward and fell at Gabriel's feet, right into a sharp kick.

>Gabriel smiled at her, the first broad, genuine smile she had seen from him in over a month, keen excitement alight in his deep green eyes.

>"Behind you." He indicated easily, the warning tempered by obvious confidence that she was more than capable of handling the threat.

>Both whirled into action, Buffy catching the black-clad vampire's

overhand attack, while Gabriel dropped his heel against the larger vampire's forehead.

>It was like old times again, fighting side by side like this. She could feel his Seventh Son energy reacting with her Slayer power, an unmistakable indication of his nearness, like a field of reassuring force. The faint sensation carried familiar intricate subtleties that made her aware of almost his every move and thought. The connection was two-way, she knew, and it allowed them to become an incredible fighting combination. Their bodies worked with stunning synchronicity, acting instinctively to compliment one another.

>She pressed her back against his, drawing strength and confidence from the solidity, and raised her hands, snagging one of the vampires by the wrist. The creature caught her with a glancing blow to the chin, but she had seen it coming and was able to avoid most of the impact. Being reunited with Gabriel, if perhaps only for the length of a battle, had lifted the shroud of sorrow and confusion that had been dampening her powers recently. Despite the fact that these vampires were stronger than any she had ever faced before, she was not worried in the least. She felt unstoppable.

>Snapping a hard kick straight up into the vampire's face, she spun around and slammed a second kick into the small of its back, throwing it into Gabriel's waiting arms. Swiftly, he jabbed a sharp wooden stake into its chest and pounded it through to the heart with the heel of his hand. The vampire staggered and fell to its knees, issuing a hissing wail as it burst into dust.

>The second vampire, the one dressed in black, took advantage of the brief distraction and dove at Gabriel, reaching for his throat. The auburn-haired young man knocked away a grasping hand and grabbed the beast tightly by the wrist. Whipping around, he drove into its spine with his elbow and threw the vampire away from him.

>Buffy nimbly jumped up, catching hold of the collar of the vampire's black coat and planting her feet into its stomach. Dropping onto her back, she kicked up and launched her adversary over her head to land on the hard floor with bone-breaking force.

>Hopping up, she scrambled over to it and planted her knee on its chest. Gabriel tossed a stake to her, which she smoothly caught and drove through its heart in two sharp blows. The vampire perished in a cloud of ashen dust.

>She lifted her head, coming face to face with Gabriel, only inches away from him. They both rose slowly to their feet, staring at one another, their lungs working from exertion.

>"Wow," he breathed heavily, his eyes holding hers, vibrant from the rush of battle, "That was great. You . . . were great."

>"Yeah," she smiled tentatively, panting, her heart throbbing in her throat, "so were you."

>"I missed this." He admitted softly, indicating the remains of the vampires then turning back to gaze longingly at her, "I missed you."

>His hand closed over hers and a flare of warmth and tickling tingles flowed through her fingers, setting her heart skipping and drawing a sharp, pleasant gasp from her lungs.

>She drew a half step closer to him, tilting her face upward and moistening her lips anxiously.

>A scream shook them from their dreamy reverie and they backed away from each other, startled but still holding hands. On one side of the auditorium, a vampire closed on Xander and Anya, backing them away from the exit. On the other, another one had Oz and Willow cornered against the towering sound system.

>"We'll talk later." Gabriel promised with absolute sincerity, mirroring her thoughts, "Go help Willow and Oz, I'll take Xander and Anya."

>She nodded and backed away a few steps, regretfully letting her fingers slip through his before turning and dashing for the stage. Watching her go, Gabriel allowed himself a slight smile before he ran to help Xander and Anya.

>* * *

>Riley hurriedly ripped off the last piece of his armored costume, casting it to the floor and pulling a stun-blaster out of a kit bag he had secreted earlier. He slipped a black fabric mask over his head and straightened the eyeholes. Less than ten feet away from him, Forrest fired his blaster into the body of an attacking vampire. The creature stumbled, but pressed on determinedly, shrugging off the blast.

>"Where the hell did all these things come from?!" Forrest shouted above the din of fearful screams and angry snarls, ducking a powerful sweep of the vampire's arm.

>Riley quickly powered up his blaster and took aim at point blank range from the beast's head. A hot bolt of electricity crashed into the undead, dropping it in its tracks.

>"I don't know." He shook his head sharply, whirling and taking a bead on a passing vampire, "But we'll have to hold them off ourselves until the rest of the troops can mobilize."

>Another commando in full gear rushed up with blaster in hand.

>"Graham," Forrest nodded grimly, recognizing the newcomer by the traces of fake blood still visible through the eyeholes of his mask, "Some party, huh?"

>"Yeah," the stocky young man agreed, "Not quite the kind of night I was hoping for. Vamps are all over, but some of them are grouping near the main exit, trying to cut off any escapees."

>Riley slung his weapon under his arm and pointed in the direction of the main doors, "Then that's where we've got to be."

>With wordless efficiency, the other two soldiers started quickly toward their destination, firing on any vampires who came within range along the way. Riley took up the rear facing backwards, trusting them to watch his back while he swept the end of his stun-gun from side to side protectively.

>Across the room, he spotted a vampire closing on a frightened young woman. He hesitated uncertainly, instinctively wanting to break formation and rescue her. But if he did, then how many would die at the exit because he was not there to support his fellow agents? He watched, helpless with indecision, as the creature grabbed her around the neck and bent forward to bite into her throat.

>The vampire's head snapped back and it lost its hold on the girl as an unknown rescuer cracked a solid punch into its face. The young man was dressed in brown and black, the garb of a gladiator, with long, black-feathered wings reaching down from his back. He fought with lightning speed, driving hard punches into his opponent's body and spinning into a solid kick. When the vampire fell onto its back, the auburn-haired young man raised a wooden stake, two-handed, and smashed it down into the vampire's heart, driving all his weight behind it.

>Staring, stunned, Riley fumbled for his detection device and aimed it, taking a reading as the vampire disintegrated into ashes. Unsurprisingly, the readout on the digital display matched his vigilante to a tee.

>The auburn-haired vigilante wasted no time after staking his enemy, jumping up and dashing in the direction he had already been headed

in. Without a second thought, Riley took up pursuit.
 >Forrest stopped, halfway to the main exit, and caught hold of Graham by the inside of his elbow.
 >"Hey, where the heck did Finn go?"
 >* * *
 >Xander screamed a desperate battle cry and barreled shoulder-first into the stomach of an attacking vampire. The creature barely budged from the impact and threw him back with a cruel laugh. He stumbled unsteadily and landed in Anya's arms, still bound by the straitjacket.
 >"Not like that, Xander" she scolded, "If you attack from the front, he's only going to break your skinny little body in two."

>Xander lurched unsteadily to his feet and fixed her with a tried stare.
 >"If you're finished with the heart-warming encouragement, Miss Back-Seat-Fighter, how about helping out?" he grunted, giving his arm a violent twist in a futile attempt to free himself, "Like maybe unhooking me?"
 >As Anya tugged at the twisted buckles on the back of Xander's straitjacket, the vampire stepped forward, clapping a huge hand over her face, and shoved her to the floor. She landed on her rear with a startled squeak.
 >Xander leaped selflessly between them, coming chest to chest with the feral creature and meeting its hate-filled gaze fearlessly.

>"Okay, it's one thing to beat on a guy in a straitjacket," he snapped angrily, outrage overpowering commonsense for the moment, "but attacking a beautiful, defenseless girl!? That's low."

>Rearing back, he brought his head forward sharply, slamming his brow into the vampire's face. Pain exploded behind his eyes, the collision felt like it had cracked his skull wide open. The creature, on the other hand, had barely flinched and glared down at him maliciously.

 >"Ow." Xander stumbled back unsteadily, his face squinted in pain.

 >The vampire's upper lip curled back in a snarl and it raised a fist to strike him. His bravery failing, Xander cringed, jamming his eyes tightly shut, and waited for the blow to fall.
 >The sound of the impact reached his ears, a sickeningly thick thud of a fist hitting flesh, but he felt no pain. Cracking an experimental eyelid, he ventured a peek.

 >He saw the vampire growling vehemently, fighting with a tall, auburn-haired youth.

 >"Gabriel?" he wiggled around inside the straitjacket and helped Anya back to her feet with an awkwardly offered elbow, staring enrapt at the combatants.

 >Gabriel strained against the enormous strength of the wild-eyed vampire, gripping its thick wrists tightly and holding the taloned hands away from his face.

 >"Run." The Seventh Son grunted through gritted teeth as the vampire bent him backward and added its weight to the struggle.

 >Xander hesitated nearby, uncertainly, pushing the side of his straitjacket up over his shoulder and freeing one arm. Anya gripped his wrist tightly and hauled doggedly on it.

 >"Come on, Xander!" She badgered him, "We're getting out of here!"

 >He remained still and she tugged on his arm again, but he resisted,

watching helplessly as Gabriel was forced to take another step back and the vampire bore down on him.

>Although Xander realized that he would probably be more hindrance than help, his sense of duty told him to stay. He was scared, terrified actually, but extreme fear sometimes brought out a streak of foolish recklessness in him. The more frightened he became, the greater his potential for bravery.

>"I can't just take off." He declared quickly, gesturing toward the ongoing battle, "There's a fight going on!"

>"I don't want you to fight!" Anya cried desperately, hauling on his arm again, "I want you to live!"

>His next argument died in his throat as her words sank in.

>"Hey!" he complained indignantly.

>Gabriel pushed forward against his opponent, then suddenly switched directions and pulled back, flipping the creature over his hip and smashing it through a heavy wooden table. The vampire recovered with impossible speed, jumping up and grappling Gabriel around the waist.

>"Go with her, Xander!" the Seventh Son shouted, stumbling back and pounding his elbow down into his attacker's spine, his voice tight with strain, "Find somewhere safe!"

>Xander hesitated, watching his friend uncertainly, before logic overpowered bravado and he reluctantly allowed Anya to drag him away.

>Gabriel shot a quick glance over his shoulder as the pair retreated, making sure they were a safe distance away.

>The vampire lifted Gabriel and slammed his body into one of the auditorium's concrete posts. The Seventh Son chopped down with both fists into the creature's neck, stunning it long enough to slip free of its grasp.

>Whirling around, he squared off against his opponent, ready for a tough fight. The vampire, equally ready, snarled and bared its fangs.

>* * *

>Willow scrambled back, desperately trying to avoid the wild swings of an attacking female vampire dressed in a ludicrous pink gown and wearing a silver tiara. A weak blow landed, a limp, open-handed slap, but the force of it was enough to throw Willow to the floor.

>"I didn't think I'd ever see YOU again." The blonde vampire sneered, "I mean, you were so proud that all these big-wig colleges accepted you and you ended up going HERE? I can't believe I signed your yearbook."

>Willow raised her eyes and took a better look, recognizing her.

>"Harmony?" she raised her eyebrows in surprise, recognizing familiar features behind the vampiric visage.

>"New and improved." The blonde sniffed proudly, "So why DID you stay in Sunnydale anyway, Brainiac?"

>Oz rose up behind her, bringing a wooden chair down over her head with all his strength, breaking it.

>Harmony scowled and turned slowly to face him, pulling pieces of her tiara out of her hair and glaring balefully at him.

>"Ow." She gritted her fangs, "Never far are you, Oz? She always kept you on a short leash."

>Using a broken piece of the chair, he lunged for her heart.

>Harmony caught his arm and ripped the stake out of his hand, dragging him in close and squeezing him in a grip of steel.

>"I think I'm going to let you live, Oz." She offered conversationally while he struggled for breath, "'Cause you're in a band and that's cool. And also so you can tell Devon that he's a jerk for not calling me over the summer. He thinks he's so hot just because he sings for the Dingoes. I'm going to bite him for that."

>"Not his fault." Oz shrugged, "The guy's just got standards."

>She snarled and tightened her hold sharply, driving the air from his lungs.

>"Ugh!" Oz's face twisted in pain.

>Willow jumped to her feet and intoned the mystic syllables of a spell under her breath, throwing her hands forward and conjuring a tight, swift column of wind. The fist-like formation slammed into the back of Harmony's head, knocking Oz out of her grasp.

>He ran to Willow's side and Harmony whirled, an angry fire in her eyes.

>"That's it!" she shrieked, "You're BOTH dead!"

>Oz put his arm around Willow and backed against the speaker nervously, watching the vampire's relentless advance.

>Willow matched his worried look and hugged herself to him in fear.

>As Harmony reached for them, a shiny red boot connected solidly with the side of her head, knocking her clean off her feet in a flaring cloud of pink fabric.

>"Harmony." Buffy greeted with a wry smile, "Glad to see karma finally caught up with you. By the way, nice costume. I wish I'd thought to come as a blob of chewed-up bubble gum."

>Harmony struggled to regain her feet, unbalanced by the girth of her dress, her face flushed with anger.

>"I knew you'd be here. Guess losers of a feather really do stick together." She growled, standing and slapping the airy folds of her dress down in frustration, "And for your information, I'm a princess, Supertramp."

>Buffy readied a stake and fell into an easy stance, "Shut up and fight."

>Harmony threw a wild haymaker at her head and Buffy ducked it easily, driving a roundhouse into her stomach. Harmony folded up with a cry of dismay and retaliated with a savage kick toward Buffy's shins. The Slayer hopped neatly over the attack and grabbed Harmony's slight body, tossing her over her hip.

>Harmony scrambled to her feet and charged, shrieking childishly. Buffy unhooked the short red cape from her shoulders and held it out to her side like a bullfighter, dancing easily out of the way and sending the other blonde crashing into a table. The vampire's strength was enormous, but laughably uncoordinated. Harmony whirled, doubly enraged, and Buffy continued to lead and bait her, moving nimbly and picking her shots until the vampire girl's resilience started to fail.

>"Hold still!" Harmony bleated, lunging at Buffy and stumbling awkwardly, "This isn't fair!"

>"Oh, and you going after Willow was?!" Buffy pointed out, "Not so fun when the shoe's on the other foot, is it? Or, in this case, the boot."

>Circling behind her, Buffy raised her foot and delivered a smart kick to Harmony's rear.

>Harmony fell on her face and burst into frustrated tears, kicking her feet and pounding her fists against the floor like a tempestuous child.

>"It's not fair! It's not fair!" she wailed.

>Buffy sighed and slipped her cape back around her shoulders, shrugging in helpless bemusement at Willow and Oz.

>"Thanks for the help." Oz smirked, pulling the cumbersome black witch's robes over his head and discarding them, "But you really have to get over this addiction to last-minute rescues."

>"Hey, if I had my way, no one would ever need rescuing." She gave Willow a quick squeeze and quirked her eyebrows, "I could go for spending the rest of my days getting cats out of trees."

>Willow's eyes fell on Harmony's sobbing form and her face became troubled.

>"What's going on?" she asked quietly, "I thought Halloween was supposed to be like a holiday or something for vampires."

>"Only one way to find out." Buffy grabbed a handful of Harmony's dress and hauled her up into a sitting position, "I don't have the heart to stake a vampire that cries, Harmony," she remarked, "So I'm going to cut you a break. What's with the symbol on your head? Is that what's making the vampires so strong?"

>Harmony sniffed and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her dress.

>"I don't know." She mumbled sullenly, all desire to fight seeming to have left her.

>"It's the mark of the Vessel." A young man's voice informed them.

>All four whipped their heads around to find a skinny, bald-headed youth dressed all in black, standing with his hands folded in front of him at his waist.

>"Michael?" Willow gasped in surprise and horror, noting the changes in him immediately, "Michael Czajak? Is that you?"

>Michael smiled to himself as he watched Harmony scramble fearfully to her feet and flee, her bulky dress gathered in her hands.

>"Yes," he shrugged, "and no. I've come to take you away from all this Willow."

>She swallowed uncomfortably, watching him with worried eyes.

>"What do you mean?"

>"It's all been for you, don't you see?" He spread his arms in a motion that was meant to encompass the entire room, "I've made myself powerful. I'm not the same as I used to be anymore."

>Buffy folded her arms across her chest and snorted, "You got that right, Bela Lugosi."

>"Silence!!" Michael snapped a commanding finger at her, his attention still focused entirely on Willow, "I'm tired of being a loser, tired of not getting what I deserve. I won't let anyone overlook me again."

>Buffy stifled a mock yawn and rolled her eyes.

>"Wow, didn't see THAT one coming." She observed, amused, "Let's see, nobody loves me so I'll raise a terrible evil and that'll fix everything. Original. Has that ever worked for ANYONE? So what exactly are you into?"

>Michael's face twisted in an evil leer and he turned his attention to her for the first time since announcing himself.

>"Don't you recognize me, Slayer?" he sneered, "It's been over two years and I can still taste your blood in my mouth."

>Buffy's wry smile dropped instantly and cold fear shot up her spine as realization hit.

>"The Master." She whispered in terrified awe, "You found his bones,

didn't you?"

>"I found more than his bones." Michael giggled like a madman, tapping a finger to his temple, "I found HIM. Now I'm going to start getting what I want for a change."

>He reached out for Willow's arm, but Oz stepped between them, blocking him.

>"I won't let you take her." He warned, instinctively protective.

>Michael paused, annoyed and yet intrigued.

>"Why?" he asked plainly, "Why would you throw your life away, like this? You're just an animal. You could never love her like I do."

>Oz matched the man-vampire's gaze with a steady stare.

>"You're right." He agreed, holding Michael's eyes with steadfast conviction, "Because I can only love her like I do."

>Michael's face suffused with sudden rage.

>"NO!!" he roared, sweeping his arm wide and clipping Oz under the chin.

>The werewolf fell, stunned, at Michael's feet, and Buffy attacked the demented warlock an instant later. Snapping a straight-legged kick up under his chin, she followed with a spinning backfist.

>"What's the matter, Michael?" she spat, striking out at him with another swift combination, "Why did you need the Master?"

>"The only thing I need is Willow." He growled, blocking her attacks swiftly and slapping an open hand across her face, "And I won't let you stop me."

>Buffy recoiled from the blow, but returned, undaunted.

>"Is it because you're afraid you couldn't do it on your own?" she pressed, shooting out with her foot to the side of his knee and jumping into a front kick with her other leg, "Or because you know it?"

>Michael caught the attack in the midsection and doubled over in pain, staggering back.

>"Shut up!" he cried, lashing out with frenzied energy, "She'll love me! She will! I just need a chance!"

>She sidestepped the desperate lunge and dropped low, sweeping his feet out from under him and dropping him hard onto his back, the impact blasting the inert air out of his lungs. He lay dazed on the floor and Buffy stepped over him, her fist raised threateningly.

>"Give it up, Michael." She directed, "It's over."

>He brought his hands up and pressed the palms against his face, moaning quietly as his shoulders started to shake, his entire torso quivering with sobs.

>Buffy suddenly felt remorseful for being so hard on him. Seeing the apparition of the Master had taken her off guard and she had reacted with instinctive violence. But the danger he presented was limited. Michael was just a puppet, a rube. Despite his appearance, he was still quiet, little Michael Czajak inside. All his trouble making had only been the result of a misguided cry for help.

>Michael's body shook more violently and a long, wild laugh worked its way out of him. Pulling his hands away, he revealed a wide, crazed grin, his cheeks wet with tears of evil mirth.

>"Ah, Slayer, it's been so long." He sighed calmly and sat up, wiping his eyes and brushing imaginary dust from his black sleeves, "I'd almost forgotten how foolishly over-confident you get."

>Buffy took a cautious step back as Michael rose and fixed her with a chillingly familiar glare.

>"You really are the Master, aren't you?" she breathed fearfully, as Willow and Oz moved supportively to flank her.

>"I'm glad that you remember me." He beckoned with a pale, taloned hand, "Let's see if you remember how to die."

>His fist shot out, aiming for her throat, and she barely got her hands up in time to redirect it. Reacting instantly, she blocked an incoming kick with the sole of her boot and swept in with a powerful uppercut.

>The Master wove back expertly, out of her reach, his knowledge of the Slayer's methods and never-ending hatred of her fueling his fighting abilities.

>His fists were like steel, shooting in at her from all angles, relentlessly seeking an opening in her defenses. A punch connected with her side, driving the air from her lungs in a pained wheeze, and another jabbed toward her head. It passed less than an inch short of her nose, she could feel the wind from it against her face, and she barely had enough time to chop down and block a swift knee aimed at her mid-section. Desperately, she backed off, chill sweat gathering on the back of her neck.

>"You're afraid of me." The Master sneered, the sound of his voice sending a fearful shiver through her, "I can smell it on you."

>Buffy snapped a quick jab to his chin, only to have it slapped aside.

>"I won't say what I smell from you." She returned with enforced bravado, "Let's just say that being dead hasn't been kind to you."

>As much as she tried to hide it, he was right. Of all the enemies she had ever faced, none had terrified her as much as the Master. Inside, she was shaken to the core, as badly as she had been the first time someone had attempted to resurrect him. Maybe worse, because this time that someone had succeeded.

>As the Master lunged again, she raised her hands to protect her face and recognized the feint too late. His other fist swooped in and slammed into her stomach with sickening force. Folding over, she backpedaled out of his immediate reach.

>The ancient vampire did not follow right away, regarding her with an easy confidence, like he had all the time in the world to deal with her.

>"You're going to die, Slayer." He assured her, "My Vessels have empowered me and this time I cannot be stopped. This town will belong to me again."

>Buffy backed off another step and forced her battered lungs to draw breath. The greatest test she had ever faced stood before her and she feared whether she would be up to the challenge. Two and a half years ago, the Master had killed her. What would make things different this time?

>But things WERE different this time. She had grown into her power since then and learned a great deal. And she wasn't fighting him alone. The knowledge of Gabriel's presence bolstered her self-confidence and something deep within her snapped, like a switch, sending a fresh flow of strength coursing through her limbs to drown the debilitating fear.

>As the Master burst forward with a streaking fist, she ducked just in time, simultaneously snapping her leg straight up and cracking her foot into the ancient vampire's jaw. The impact sent him staggering back a few steps, astonished. Buffy raised her hands and fell into a comfortable stance. Now she had become the aggressor.

>"Wanna bet?" she replied, advancing, her eyes intense and locked on her nemesis.

>* * *

>Gabriel flew back, holding his jaw, and crashed through a wooden table, splintering it. Grabbing up a sharp fragment from the remains, he lunged for the vampire's heart. But before the weapon's point made contact, the vampire cracked a hard fist across his jaw and planted a foot into his stomach, launching him back to collide with the edge of another table.

>Pain lanced up his spine, but he ignored it, dropping into a crouch and driving forward, fists leading. His opponent acted with blinding speed, ducking aside and slamming a knee into Gabriel's mid-section. The Seventh Son rolled with the attack, spinning into a vicious backfist to the vampire's throat and following with a sharp sidekick. As it fell forward, choking, he slammed the jagged, makeshift stake into its chest and jumped back. The creature disintegrated into a cloud of dust with an airy roar.

>Breathing heavily with exertion, Gabriel paused to take stock of the situation. All around him costumed students were screaming and fleeing chaotically in search of escape. Scattered amongst them were a number of vampires, apparently all as powerful as the one he had just destroyed, feasting on the frightened college students with joyous abandon.

>There were too many of them for him to face alone, but he was not afraid. The few brief minutes he had fought by Buffy's side again had re-energized him. For the first time in over a month, he felt alive again.

>A weight hit him across the shoulders and he reacted instantly, driving back with a swift elbow to his attacker's ribs. There was a pained grunt and a wheeze of displaced breath in his ear as the arms around his torso lost strength. Efficiently, he spun around behind his opponent, and hooked his forearm tightly around its throat.

>The body in his arms was strong, but nowhere near the strength of the enhanced vampires. But it wasn't a vampire he was facing, he realized, releasing his hold and shoving his captive away. With surprising dexterity, the figure regained its footing and whirled, leveling a strange-looking gun at him.

>Gabriel found himself facing a human male around his own height, dressed in a black fabric hood and khaki army fatigues. Normally not a threat. But the gun pointed in his direction looked real, albeit strange, and indicated the origin of the commando. The elusive Initiative.

>"Don't move." The soldier commanded, edging slightly closer and watching him carefully.

>Gabriel complied curiously, slowly raising his hands and using the opportunity to focus his Second Sight. The young man's aura became plain to see, like a halo of glowing sky-blue sparkles surrounding his entire body. He was brave and dutiful, loyal to his commitments, that much was obvious, but there was something different about him underneath, not quite normal for a human.

>"Now don't give me any problems." He advised, nudging Gabriel with the barrel of the gun and absently tapping a small electronic device clipped to his belt, "I've been through a lot of trouble looking for you."

>Gabriel's eyes followed the strange looking tracker as the soldier circled behind him.

>"Is that so?" he questioned over his shoulder, his curiosity deepening, "You're not worried about the vampires?"

>"We've been tracking them, too. They'll be taken care of." The

soldier replied assuredly, "But that's not my concern. Or yours anymore."

>As the soldier withdrew a set of handcuffs from his belt and pulled one of his arms down behind his back, Gabriel spun swiftly and shoved the young man sprawling onto his back.

>"Wrong." He shook his head slightly, "It IS my concern. And as much as I'd like to follow you back to your base and find out what trouble the Initiative is up to, I can't afford the time right now. I have to go."

>The soldier took quick aim with his gun and fired, singeing Gabriel's side with a blast of electricity as he dove for cover and hit the floor. Rising to his feet, the commando advanced on him with efficient steps, the gun trained unerringly on his torso.

>"Afraid I can't let you do that." He stated, angling the weapon down at Gabriel's prone body, "Get up."

>Gabriel shifted slowly, affecting defeat, and covertly slipped the manticore wings from his back. Gripping them at the point where they joined, he burst into action, sweeping his arm up and throwing the feathered garment into the soldier's face. A shot from the gun misfired, streaking into the rafters, and Gabriel leaped for his opponent, slapping the weapon roughly from his grip to clatter against the floor. He kicked the gun away as the khaki-clad fighter backed off and quickly shifted gears, circling with his hands raised into loose fists.

>"You don't want to do this." Gabriel warned, mirroring the other's stance.

>"No choice." He replied simply, "I have my orders. You're coming with me if I have to carry you."

>The soldier sprang forward, leading with a short kick and switching up into a quick sequence of punches. While the attacks were impressive and skillfully executed, Gabriel avoided them easily, blocking without conscious effort. Stepping inside his opponent's reach, he grabbed a handful of the soldier's black fabric mask and pulled a jab to the center of his chest, just as a warning. While the young man's tenacity was getting annoying, Gabriel had no intention of seriously hurting him if he could avoid it.

>The soldier coughed and backed off, his hand pressed to his bruised sternum, staring stunned at the hood as it hung from Gabriel's clenched fist. His clear, blue eyes flicked anxiously between it and the Seventh Son's face.

>He looked vaguely familiar, appearing only a few years older than Gabriel, with sandy blonde hair and clean-cut, wholesome features.

>"Still planning on taking me in, soldier-boy?" Gabriel stared at him piercingly, a dangerous edge creeping into his voice, "I don't have time to play games with you. Keep this up and you'll only get hurt."

>Gabriel hoped the threat would be enough to convince the young man to back down. But the soldier wasn't ready to surrender. He squared off with Gabriel, his back straight with resolve.

>"I have my orders." He repeated evenly, steadily meeting the Seventh Son's stare.

>The auburn-haired youth sighed resignedly and relaxed into a practiced fighting stance, arms raised in an unorthodox T-shape and feet positioned in perfect balance. He didn't have time for this, not with a slew of super-vampires running wild.

>"It's not wise to live your life by another person's agenda." he advised calmly, a deadly seriousness in his eyes, "Trust me."

>The young man didn't respond, instead spinning into an impressively fast backfist aimed at Gabriel's throat. The Seventh Son reacted faster, catching his wrist in a steely grip, twisting it up sharply behind his back and shoving him away with ease.

>The commando spun around, facing him again on even ground, red-faced but retaining his calm. He clearly knew that he was no match for Gabriel in hand-to-hand combat. While he moved with the strength and skill obviously resulting from years of intensive training, Gabriel's power was inborn and his own training had begun from the moment of his birth. The soldier was utterly outclassed. And yet he seemed steadfastly determined to continue fighting, despite the odds.

>While Gabriel pondered this strange observance, a tall, blonde-haired vampire wearing a sleeveless denim vest appeared behind the young soldier, arms raised to strike.

>Gabriel instinctively burst into action, lunging forward.

>"Down!" he shouted, shoving the soldier aside with more force than he had intended and striking out with a sandaled foot into the vampire's gut. The young commando stumbled, colliding shoulder-first with a concrete post and collapsing to the floor with a groan of pain, while Gabriel quickly intercepted the vampire's next attack with a blocking sweep of his arm.

>The fanged creature slammed a solid punch into Gabriel's mid-section, blasting the air from his lungs and doubling him over, then jumped into a graceful kick. Gabriel managed to block some of the impact with his forearm, but the creature's heavy boot still connected painfully with his chest. He rolled with the force of it, whipping into a roundhouse kick and pounding the lower part of his shin into the vampire's ribs with a loud thud. It snarled in pain, but barely budged, hooking a thick arm around the leg and pinning it to its side.

>The vampire's face broke in a wide, evil grin and it spun around, hurling Gabriel into a stand of tables and chairs. Furniture broke under his weight and splintered with a tattoo of sharp cracks as he hit the floor amid a pile of wooden fragments. The pain was excruciating, the hard edges biting into his flesh with bruising force, but Gabriel shook it off, struggling to his feet with a jagged table leg in his hand.

>"Come on." He beckoned, stepping out of the wreckage into a clear beam of moonlight that streamed through a nearby tall, bay window.

>The vampire flicked back its dirty blonde locks and sneered hatefully, eager to comply. They clashed again with savage intensity, the vampire gnashing its teeth and Gabriel stabbing downward with the makeshift stake. The vampire knocked the weapon out of his hand and clamped strong fingers around his throat, squeezing. Choking and gritting his teeth with effort, Gabriel pressed forward, jamming his thumb into the vampire's eye. It howled in agony and rage, releasing him and clapping its hands to its face.

>In a desperate move, the vampire seized its adversary by the leather straps crossed over his chest, jerking him forward and hoisting him overhead with an enraged roar. Gabriel kicked and fought helplessly, trying unsuccessfully to break the hold. The creature turned and eyed the bay window with a cunning leer.

>Glass shattered deafeningly as Gabriel's body blasted through the pane and landed with a limp thud on the hard ground outside, scattering razor-edged fragments in all directions.

>The long-haired vampire stepped over the lip of the sundered window with a confident leer and bent low to pick up a sharp tooth of glass.

Gabriel lay dazed and weak in the grass amid a kaleidoscope arrangement of jagged shards, blood running freely down his neck from a gash on his forehead.

>The vampire chuckled darkly, kneeling over him and raising the glass dagger high, aimed for the young man's exposed throat.

>* * *

>Buffy smashed her fist into the Master's forehead, following with a stiff chop to his throat and a side kick which threw him back almost five feet. Power rushed through her body, filling her and building momentum like a locomotive engine. Her reflexes were faster than she had ever felt them, swinging her limbs into position before she even consciously realized what she was doing. The Master was landing fewer and fewer blows now and the pain of the few that slipped through her defenses was dulled and barely noticeable.

>The bald vampire grunted and snarled as he fought, losing more control each time she blocked an attack or landed a strike of her own.

>"Not such a tough guy now, are you?" Buffy berated him, driving a hard kick into his body.

>The Master roared, more from outrage than pain, and grabbed hold of her by the arm, throwing her into the wooden stage.

>She barely slowed, bouncing back in a flurry of striking fists and feet. Adrenaline sang in her bloodstream, pumping through her system and sharpening her senses to razor-edged keenness. It was like she could see every moment with crystal clarity, study it before deciding on a course of action. The Master left an opening near his mid-section, she stuffed her foot into his gut. He dropped his hands a little, she cracked a fist into his face. She felt like she was in total control.

>Pounding into the Master with her fists, she spun into an impressive kick to his jaw, knocking him to the floor. In a flash, she dropped and jammed her knee into his chest, grabbing him by the throat and pinning him to the floor.

>Drawing a stake, she raised her free arm and held it high, positioned for a killing blow. Looking into the Master's fear-filled, black-irised eyes, she hesitated. He lay under her, weak and defeated, not at all like the terrible monster she had once known. How much of Michael Czajak existed within him? And how could she stake him with a clear conscience without knowing?

>She tightened her grip on the stake and looked uncertainly to Willow and Oz. The pair seemed to understand her dilemma and were equally unsure. Willow's eyes widened and she covered her mouth, pointing beyond Buffy in shock.

>Instinctively, Buffy lifted her head and followed the indication.

>A hundred feet away, Gabriel grappled with a tall, blonde vampire in the attire of a street thug. The creature desperately grabbed hold of the wide, leather straps across his chest and hauled him off his feet, flexing its legs and launching him toward a tall window.

>Buffy watched in horror as his body hurtled through the air and smashed through the glass with a sharp crash.

>"Gabriel!" she cried out, rising and unintentionally turning her back to her enemy.

>The Master's moment of weakness passed in an instant and he bolted to his feet with lightning speed. Grabbing up a wooden chair by the legs, he brought it down over the back of her neck. The chair exploded into a dozen fragments and Buffy collapsed in a heap, limp and unconscious.

>"Buffy!" Willow shouted in fear, rushing forward and intercepting

the Master's arms as he raised the remains of the chair for another blow.

>"Get off me, witch!" he snarled, jerking free of her grasp.

>Oz joined the attack, pounding ineffectually on the vampire with his fists. The Master's hand closed around his throat and he went rigid, choking with pain.

>"Leave him alone!" Willow jumped up and brought all of her weight down on the Master's arm, hoping to break the hold.

>He snarled in annoyance, throwing Oz back like a ragdoll and cracking a vicious backhand slap across Willow's face. The arm movement stopped abruptly, an instant after his hand struck her, and the Master's face twitched uncontrollably.

>"No, Willow! I'm sorry!" he wailed in Michael's voice, falling to his knees next to her still form, his face filled with desperate regret.

>While his right hand reached out to her in concern, his left spasmed and curled into a fist.

>"Leave her!" he snarled out of one side of his mouth through clenched teeth, "Take the Slayer. We have to move now before she wakes up!"

>Straightening slowly, the Master reluctantly left Willow behind and scooped the Slayer's limp body into his arms. With a moment of concentration, he sent a silent command, informing his servants to cover his retreat. Their numbers were much lower than he had anticipated, down to less than ten from the dozen-and-a-half he had started with. The loss was a manageable one, however. Servants could easily be replaced. He had what he wanted.

>Casting one last glance over his shoulder, he noted the young werewolf kneeling next to Willow, her head resting in his lap, and surge of jealous rage flared within him. Michael's personality re-emerged and he stopped abruptly, his feet cemented to the spot. No. He was tired of being used. He wanted Willow and he would have her, regardless of the Master's wishes. It was time for the ancient vampire to carry out his bidding for a change.

>*Foolish Minion.* the Master sneered patronizingly, *You would be nothing without me.*

>"N-no." Michael stammered aloud, gathering the tiny grains of his pride into a tenuous tower of will, "You owe me. I demand that you give me what I want!"

>The vampire chuckled in derisive amusement, the sound echoing resonantly within Michael's crowded skull. Pride from a spineless human wretch, how utterly laughable. Instantly, the Master's intellect stifled the emotion, surging up in an unstoppable black tide and crushing his host's consciousness beneath endless layers of cold dominance. Michael fought back feebly for an instant, struggling, but his effort was negligible in comparison to his opponent's vastly rejuvenated strength. The struggle was over before it had even begun.

>The Master's mentality eased out, languidly filling the meager space that had once belonged to Michael Czajak, and he looked down at the unconscious Slayer in his arms with a smile. He had what he wanted.

>* * *

>Riley scrambled across the floor, reaching for his stun-gun with outstretched hands, watching the disastrous turn of events with horror. The vampire's hand rose to strike, a jagged tine of glass clasped in its fist like a blade, just moments from killing the auburn-haired vigilante.

>"Kill you." The vampire leered.

>Riley's finger touched the smooth metal of the gun and he pulled it into his hands, rolling and firing blindly in the creature's direction. The blast of electricity smashed into the hostile's body from behind and crackling blue-white tendrils of energy raced over its skin in a dizzying display. Snarling in pain, the vampire staggered and Riley fired two more bolts into its spine before it was driven to the ground, unconscious.

>"Not tonight." He announced, stepping into the open window area and lowering the smoking tip of his stun-gun, still cradling his bruised shoulder.

>He crouched next to the young vigilante's fallen form, tugging a white handkerchief out of his belt and pressing it to the wound on his head.

>"I told you I'd carry you in if I had to." He reminded him triumphantly, watching with concern as the white cloth turned red with absorbed blood.

>The youth's eyes were glassy, unfocused, yet he stirred and pawed at the ground, trying to push himself up.

>"Sit back." Riley pressed him down gently by the shoulders, "The medics will take care of you once we get you back to base. Aggravate a back injury and you could end up paralyzed. A lot of guys would be dead after what I just saw you take."

>The vigilante shoved the hand with the cloth away from his head and sat up sharply.

>"I'm not like a lot of guys." He coughed, strength apparently returning to his body as the shock of his injuries began to wear off, "And I'm not going anywhere with you."

>Riley observed his unbelievable recovery in amazement, leveling the stun-gun at him.

>"The way I see it, you don't have much of a choice." The sandy-haired young man replied.

>A pair of vampires passed by the broken window, bearing down on two hooded commandos. Both fired stun-blasters at one of the creatures, slowing, but not stopping it.

>"Finn!" one of them shouted, spotting their comrade, "Where've you been? Get in here and help us, man!"

>As they blasted the weakened vampire again, its companion leaped forward, knocking both commandos to the ground.

>Riley was torn. Before him sat the vigilante that he was sworn to bring in, his prize assignment completed in an impressively short time. But his friends and fellow agents needed him. Damn.

>Turning his back to the auburn-haired youth, he ran back inside. His personal assignment could wait. The vigilante wouldn't leave town, he was sure. And they would meet again.

>* * *

>Oz and Xander walked Willow slowly between them, holding her up with her arms draped across their shoulders. The auditorium had almost cleared out, the last of the enhanced vampires having either retreated or been apprehended by groups of black-hooded commandos. The place was a wreck, strewn with glass fragments, sundered furniture and fallen decorations.

>"I'm okay." Willow protested, pulling free of them, displaying only a slight waver in her step, "Really."

>"You sure?" Oz stroked a tender finger through her short, auburn hair.

>She smiled and nodded. His throat was bruised and she could tell he had hurt his back when the Master had thrown him down, but his only concern was for her.

>Anya grabbed Xander's arm and pointed, "Isn't that your friend over

there?"

>Xander followed her outstretched arm to a tall window way, outlined with the jagged remains of a shattered pane. Outside, amid a scattering of shards, an auburn-haired youth stood up tentatively and brushed himself off.

>"Gabriel!" Willow called as the four ran up to him, "Are you all right? You're bleeding!"

>He touched his fingers to his forehead gingerly and noted the drying blood without concern.

>"It's nothing." He scowled slightly, staggering a little as he reentered the auditorium, "Where's Buffy?"

>Willow's face turned dark and she looked to Oz in agitation.

>"The Master." She whispered tensely, "He took her."

>Gabriel straightened as a jolt of panic shot through him, all traces of weakness disappearing in an instant. The Master had Buffy. The Master who had killed her once. The Master who he, in his foolish shortsightedness, had refused to believe as a significant threat. And now he had her.

>"We have to find her." He declared resolutely, running an agitated hand roughly through his hair, "How long has she been gone?"

>It was difficult to think clearly. His heart was pounding wildly in his chest, adrenaline-laden blood surging through his veins. How could this be happening? He had just made a breakthrough with her, found a crack in the wall that had been separating them, and now her life was in serious danger.

>Willow frowned in concentration, flattening her hand against her temple and wincing.

>"Only a few minutes." She nodded gently, "We came looking for you right away."

>"You're hurt. Stay here." He commanded shortly, his limbs tense, "Oz, take her to the campus nurse or the hospital if you have to. Xander, you and Anya contact my uncle then get the rest of the students to safety."

>Oz nodded agreeably, leading Willow toward the exit, while Anya's face knotted up in annoyance as it often did in Gabriel's presence. She held her tongue, but Xander, on the other hand, was not so ready to remain silent.

>"Wait," he protested, "you aren't planning on going after her alone, are you?"

>"No choice." Gabriel replied over his shoulder as he sifted through the wreckage of a number of broken chairs and selected a few pieces that would make serviceable stakes, "Every second I'm here, he gets closer to killing her."

>Xander folded his arms across his chest resolutely, "Then I'm going, too."

>Gabriel shook his head in negation, but before he could refuse him, Anya interjected.

>"Will you give it up already with the hero routine?" she pleaded sharply, concern showing through her hard-edged tone, "If Mister Wonderful wants to run off and get himself killed, let him. But not you. I love you."

>"She's right." Gabriel agreed, despite the disparagement that had been aimed at him, "It's too dangerous."

>Xander's brow furrowed in frustration and he pulled away from Anya's hands.

>"That's why you need me." He insisted staunchly.

>"This isn't your fight, Xander." Gabriel refused to listen, tucking the stakes into his belt, "I could have stopped this a month ago. And

I didn't."

>Xander cocked his head and frowned, "What are you talking about?"

>"I'll explain later." The Seventh Son loped out through the broken window into the cool, night air, "I hope."

>* * *

>Gabriel hit the grass outside at a full run. He had no idea how to find the Master, but he knew who would. It wasn't long before he found a trio of hooded Initiative soldiers ganging up on one of the Master's enhanced minions at the bottom of a small hill, blasting it from three directions. The creature roared in pain and struck one of them, knocking him flat.

>Slipping one of the stakes out of his belt, Gabriel drew back his arm, taking aim. He whipped the wooden projectile overhand and bolted down the hill, meeting the vampire only instants after the stake struck it in the chest. With a sharp punch, he spun the creature around and slammed a kick into the center of its back. The vampire fell forward onto the ground, driving the stake through its heart under the force of its own weight, and burst into a cloud of dust.

>The three soldiers fell into formation, each with a stun-gun trained on him.

>"Nice moves." The centermost of the three observed, "Glad to see you stuck around. We were just on our way to find you."

>Gabriel focused his Second Sight on the speaker. The voice sounded familiar and he was not surprised to discover the same halo of glowing sky-blue sparkles as he had seen around the soldier he had fought inside. His gaze dropped to the tracking device hooked to the soldier's belt and he smiled.

>"I was hoping you'd say that." He took a slow, steady step forward, keeping his hands visible in a non-threatening posture, "Give me the tracker and go back to picking off the stragglers."

>The soldiers cocked their weapons in warning.

>"What do you want the tracker for?" the center soldier frowned, "It's tuned to your signature."

>"Just mine?" Gabriel raised his eyebrows in knowing question.

>The center soldier swiftly brought his weapon to his shoulder and aimed down the length of it at him.

>"Forget it." His blue eyes narrowed with disapproval and understanding, "Hostile Prime is OUR objective."

>Gabriel held him with a steady stare and took another step forward.

>"That's why you're not going after him." He told the soldiers with absolute certainty, a determined edge underlying his voice, "There's only one objective here and the Master is not it. Either give me the tracker now or I'll lay the three of you out and just take it."

>One of the other soldiers, this one slightly taller than the others, snorted and stepped forward.

>"Just who the hell do you think you are, Hotshot?" he demanded angrily, his chest puffed out, "In case you haven't noticed, there are three of us and only one of you."

>The rightmost of his companions joined him, while the center soldier adjusted the charge on his stun-gun and fell back slightly.

>"I've faced tougher odds," Gabriel replied, inching subtly closer, "with a lot less on the line."

>Lashing out, he swiftly slapped the closest soldier's gun out of his hand and grabbed a tight fistful of uniform, shoving the man into one

of his companions and springing at the third.

>The commando was ready for him, though, having become familiar with Gabriel's prowess during their earlier battle, and jumped back, swinging the butt of his weapon up under the Seventh Son's chin.

>Gabriel's head snapped back and darkness flared before his eyes for an instant. The blow hurt, but Gabriel was battling the clock and he couldn't afford to let it slow him down. He needed that tracker.

>Ignoring the dizzying pain, he cracked a backhand fist across the soldier's face and fell back as one of the others grappled him around the waist. Gabriel stuffed a knee into his new opponent's solar plexus, blasting the air from the young man's lungs, and tossed his gasping body aside.

>The third soldier, the one who had challenged him, squared off against him with his hands raised, bouncing confidently on the balls of his feet.

>"You want a fight, Hotshot?" he asked, steadily circling Gabriel with the grace of a skilled boxer.

>Gabriel feigned a nervous step backward and the overconfident soldier fell for the ploy, dipping into the Seventh Son's reach, eager to strike. A sandaled foot snapped up into the soldier's jaw, instantly dropping him limp to the ground.

>"Not with you." Gabriel smirked triumphantly down at the unconscious commando.

>A sharp blow struck him in the center of his back, driving him to his knees with a hiss of pain. Another impact thudded between his shoulder blades, lancing pain down the length of his spine and robbing his limbs of strength. He collapsed forward, scraping the heels of his hands in the dirt, and lay still as the soldier he had fought in the auditorium circled around in front of him.

>"Sorry about that." The young man apologized, rubbing his own jaw, careful to keep his stun-gun leveled on him, "But you brought it on yourself."

>Gabriel gritted his teeth and struggled to push himself up, the muscles of his arms trembling with the effort. The last blow had stunned him, overloaded his nerves and left them uncooperative for the moment. Dammit, how could he have been so careless?

>"You don't understand." He gasped, laboring to rise, "I . . . I have to find her . . . before it's too late."

>"We'd all like to go chasing the girl of our dreams tonight," the soldier sympathized, shoving Gabriel back to the dirt and pinning him with a knee pressed into the small of his back, "but you and I have other places to go. Party's over."

>Fear chilled Gabriel's skin as the soldier gripped him by the wrists and gathered his hands behind his back, withdrawing a set of steel handcuffs with his free hand. His strength was rapidly returning, but not fast enough for him to escape capture, especially with the commando's stun blaster to deal with. He had failed. His skill and dedication had been put to the test and he had failed yet again. Bitterness welled inside him and he jammed his eyes shut, gathering strength for a desperate move, anything to escape.

>A slight click sounded from the crest of the hill and the soldier's head snapped up in alarm. Before he could bring his blaster to bear, a bolt of blue-white energy struck him in the chest and threw him to the ground, his body jerking spastically.

>Gabriel rolled over and squinted up the hillside toward his unknown benefactor.

>Xander grinned down at him and blew a wisp of imaginary smoke from

the end of an Initiative stun-gun. Flanking him were Willow and Oz.

>"Told you you'd need me." Xander chuckled as he sauntered down the small slope. He paused to inspect the barely conscious body of the soldier he had taken down and smiled proudly, "Yep, still got it."

>"You okay, man?" Oz offered out his hand to Gabriel who gripped it and pulled himself to his feet.

>"I'll be alright in a minute." He nodded, leaning forward and propping his hands on his knees. After a few deep breaths, he straightened again, looking around, "Where's Anya?"

>"Giles must have unplugged his phone, probably for Masterpiece Theatre again." Xander surmised, "We figured she'd be the best bet to go get him. That and nobody really trusted her to carry a stun-gun."

>"Wise decision." Gabriel sighed sympathetically.

>Gabriel crouched by the fallen commando and unclipped the tracking device from his belt, cocking his head at Xander, "That was a nice shot. We should have got you one of those things months ago."

>"What can I say, you can take the boy out of the soldier, but you can't completely take the soldier out of the boy." Xander shrugged, peering at the tracker curiously, "So what were you doing fighting the Initiative? Beating up the other kids for their toys? That's not playing nice, you know."

>Gabriel flexed his shoulders to work out the worst of the pain and winced.

>"I'm not playing games." He stated, holding the device out at arm's length and fiddling with the single control knob, "This is going to lead us to the Master."

>"Us, huh?" Xander noted with an arched eyebrow, "I see you're finally starting to realize that this is a group effort. And all we had to do was save your life. Go figure."

>Gabriel shook his head bemusedly, quickly determining the workings of the tracking device and taking a reading. The signal grew stronger in one direction more than any other, indicating a direct path to the Master. And where he could find the Master, he would also find Buffy.

>He paused and looked to Willow and the way she seemed to still be a little woozy from the blow she had taken earlier.

>"You sure you feel up to this?" he asked her.

>"Probably not." She shrugged, mild pain registering on her face, "But I'm no worse off than you."

>"Good point." He agreed, his eyes shining with respect, "Let's go."

>* * *

>Buffy shifted slightly, a stabbing pain throbbing at the base of her skull. Instinctively, she kept her eyes shut, feigning unconsciousness. Her mind felt clouded and dull. She remembered fighting the Master and beating him down. Then she had seen Gabriel's body crash through a window; everything had gone dark after that. Now she had awoken someplace new, but oddly familiar.

>Wherever she was, she was not alone. A set of nervous, shuffling footsteps sounded nearby, boots scraping softly against rough stone.

>And there were others nearby as well, she could feel them, standing still and silent. Vampires. The Master's minions, which meant that the one who was pacing had to be the Master himself.

>Suppressing a shudder of sickening fear, she forced herself to

calmly take stock of the situation. The Master had captured her and taken her somewhere underground, a cavern or a sewer maybe. Not damp enough to be a sewer, so she settled on cavern as a better guess. Her body had been laid upon a cold, stone slab and the bare rock had gradually leeched the heat from her flesh, no doubt leaving the muscles underneath stiff and tight. The air carried the scent of cool ash and a faintly familiar sulfurous taint, something that tickled at a long-buried memory. She knew where she was, she could never forget it. Beneath the ruins of the old Sunnydale High School existed a gaping fissure that housed the Hellmouth, the apparent source of the Master's power. Two years ago, she had been drowned not far from this very spot.

>How long had she been unconscious? Carefully, she began to flex her limbs an imperceptible amount to get the blood moving again. With no immediately available weapons, she would have to be ready to move at a moment's notice if she was going to get out of this alive.

>She waited until the shuffling feet drew closer and blindly spun her lower body around, smashing a kick into the Master's spine. The pale-faced vampire stumbled forward and rolled instinctively, barely avoiding a dropping, red-booted foot.

>As he jumped back to his feet, his seven remaining minions surrounded him protectively, each marked with the triangular Vessel sigil and glaring at her with bottomless hate. The Master turned to face her, his eyes narrowed, and crossed his arms over his chest.

>"Glad to see you're finally awake." He grinned broadly, exposing sharp, elongated canines, "I really want you to feel it when I kill you."

>Buffy relaxed into a comfortable fighting stance, bending her knees slightly to adjust for the high heels of her boots. She hopped down from the stone outcropping and tightened the muscles of her upper body into springy readiness.

>"Bring it on, Baldy." She jerked her chin up and beckoned with her left hand.

>The Master arched an intrigued eyebrow and snickered darkly.

>"Oh, I do love that entertaining streak of bravado." He mused, inclining his head in a silent command to his followers. Together, they formed a rough circle surrounding her, "But who do you think you're fooling? You don't even have a weapon."

>Buffy met his gaze confidently and raised her eyebrows, "Who said I didn't have a weapon?"

>Pivoting sharply, she snapped her boot out to the side, impaling one of the Vessels through the heart with her heel and turning it into an exploding column of grayish dust.

>Spinning around, she blocked an incoming attack from behind and countered with a quick series of punches before mounting a stone and bounding away. Direct conflict wasn't going to work here, her enemies were too many and too strong, not to mention that she had been reduced to using wood-filled boot heels in lieu of actual stakes. Her first shot had been a lucky one and she doubted she would be able to pull it off again. Luckily, she wouldn't have to.

>A brown-clad figure dropped into the chamber, landing atop a high stone ledge, and leaped feet-first onto one of the vampires. Both the creature and its attacker went down in a pile, but only one got up again. As the vampire disintegrated with a two-inch wide hole in its chest, an auburn-haired young man straightened and hefted a jagged length of wood in his hand with a cocky grin.

>"Sorry to crash your party, Summers, but the bash went lame real

fast."

>"Gabriel!" she smiled brightly, relieved.

>"Not just me." He winked at her and gestured to the ledge behind him as Oz, Xander and Willow lowered themselves down from above.

>Willow waved shortly, still garbed in the body portion of her werewolf suit, and shrugged, "What can I say, we missed you."

>A slow series of sharp, steady sounds echoed throughout the chamber and the Master stepped between his silently obedient servants, clapping his hands and smiling patronizingly.

>"Isn't this a precious moment," the vampire sneered, "The boy hero arrives to rescue his girlfriend. How predictably presumptuous. This is not your concern, Seventh Son. The Slayer and I have an old hatred, rooted in death, you wouldn't understand. Or would you?"

>Gabriel scowled and backed down a step.

>"My personal demons are my own problem." he asserted angrily, "Now let her go."

>"I'm afraid not." The Master sighed in annoyance and immediately five vampires fell into line, flanking him, "Looks like we'll have to fight it out."

>The Vessels rushed past Gabriel as one, clambering up the ledge after their human prey. Oz and Xander ran to the edge and fired on the first two at point-blank range, striking the tops of their heads and blasting them back to the floor.

>Beyond the chaos, Buffy pounced on the Master's back, reaching for a choke hold on his throat. With a harsh grunt, he shook her off and brought his fist down, narrowly missing her head.

>"Keep them busy." Gabriel shouted over his shoulder to the others as he planted his feet and flipped a vampire over his hip, "I'm going after the Master."

>Dashing between the attacking Vessels, he dove and rolled, coming up to face their lord.

>The Master was waiting for him and struck for his head. Gabriel lurched back desperately, the fist falling less than an inch short of his chin, and whirled into a roundhouse kick. His opponent moved with greater speed than Gabriel had ever seen, blocking the kick before it even neared him and throwing it aside with abrupt force.

>As Gabriel spun and skidded to the ground, Buffy sprang to her feet and attacked from the Master's opposite side, seeking to take advantage of his distraction. The vampire lord deftly slid aside and clamped his hand over her face, pulling her in then throwing her back with ease. She stumbled and landed on her rear, the impact jarring her lungs.

>Something had changed with the Master since the fight at the auditorium. He was far more powerful, his actions swift and decisive, with no visible trace of Michael Czajak's marked lack of confidence. All evidence of his human host had been eliminated and he looked exactly as she remembered him. Whatever transformation he had been undergoing was apparently finished. The ancient vampire had returned in force, the epitome of her worst nightmare.

>"Give it up, Bat-face." Gabriel demanded, bouncing to his feet again and advancing on the Master, "You can't take both of us."

>Without taking his eyes off his target, he slipped a makeshift stake from his belt and tossed it to Buffy. She caught the weapon easily and took up position opposite the Seventh Son with the Master between them.

>The Master tilted his head and grinned arrogantly.

>"On the contrary, boy." He chuckled, as the pair circled, stalking him, "I can. You'll regret following her here."

>Gabriel turned his stake over in his hand, point-up like a knife, and smirked confidently.

>"Make me."

>As he dove forward, the Master quickly kneed him in the stomach and tossed him aside, then whirled to catch Buffy's downward strike.

Wrenching her wrist, he gripped the upper part of her arm and threw her away. An instant later, Gabriel connected with a solid kick to the underside of his chin, ducking a heavy-handed backhand swing.

Buffy's fist snapped into the back of the Master's head, followed by a hard elbow.

>The vampire's strength and resilience were unbelievable, far greater than either Buffy or Gabriel, but by working in tandem, they kept him off balance and held a tenuous advantage.

>The vampire lord roared in rage and spun around only to catch a kick in the back from Gabriel.

>"Get off me, you annoying little insects!" he snarled as he lashed out at the Slayer and Gabriel cracked another kick into his side, "I will kill you!"

>Buffy dropped into a footsweep and knocked the Master's legs out from under him, dumping him flat on his back.

>"Gotta catch me if you're going to kill me." She quipped, dancing back out of his reach and allowing Gabriel to move in.

>As the Seventh Son raised his foot, the Master threw his palm upward, shouting a sharp, guttural syllable, and a flash of blinding green light flared before Gabriel's eyes. The young man's face went livid with terror for an instant and then he collapsed to the cavern floor in a heap.

>The Master rose over him, his hands balled into fists, and leered.

>"Got you."

>* * *

>Xander blasted one of a pair of vampires as the other clipped his shoulder with a punch and knocked him to the ground.

>Moving quickly to intercept, Oz fired a bolt into the creature's chest, driving it back. With barely enough time to nod acknowledgement, he continued on his way, rushing to assist Willow.

>As Xander climbed to his feet again, a flash of greenish light captured his attention. Snapping his head around, he was just in time to see Gabriel fall, his body flopping limp and lifelessly.

>Xander and Buffy both reacted with instinctive retaliation, Xander firing a blast of electricity into the Master's chest while Buffy snapped a kick straight up under his chin.

>The instant the old vampire had been knocked clear, Buffy hooked her hands under Gabriel's arms and dragged the dead weight of his body up to the relative safety of the rocky ledge.

>Xander ran over to her, blasting another vampire.

>"What happened?" he asked between ragged breaths, worried by the still, ashen expression on Gabriel's face.

>Buffy gathered the young man's limbs together and pulled him back against the wall, propping his body in a kneeling position.

>"I don't know." She answered, her voice strained with distress as she cradled and stroked his face, "The Master hit him with some kind of spell. I don't think he's hurt, but he won't wake up either."

>Willow noted what was going on and ducked, scurrying over under the

protection of Oz and Xander's continuously firing blasters.

>"Something's happening to him, Will," Buffy pleaded, watching with worry as a single tear squeezed out of the corners of each of Gabriel's eyes and crawled down his otherwise placid face, "you gotta undo this."

>The auburn-haired girl furrowed her brow and bit down on her bottom lip in thought.

>"I-I don't know, Buffy." She hesitated, flinching as another vampire nearly made the ledge and was blown back by twin stun blasts, "There's no magic left to undo. The spell must have just triggered something. Whatever's happening to him is all in his mind."

>Buffy knelt in front of him and pulled his hands into her lap, clasping them tightly.

>"I'm going in after him."

>The Master glared up from the lower level and swept his hand impatiently through the air.

>"You can't escape me, Slayer!" he snarled as three of his minions attacked the higher ground together.

>The first caught a doubled burst of electricity in the stomach and dropped back while the second fell victim to a stunning light spell from Willow. The third, however, made it over the lip and lunged at Xander. Unable to bring his weapon around in time, he was utterly defenseless.

>Still holding Gabriel's hands, Buffy kicked out and connected with the vampire's jaw with enough force to topple the fiend over the edge.

>"Hold them off!" she shouted over her shoulder as she knelt down in front of Gabriel again, "I need time to get through to him."

>Xander and Oz nodded gravely and Buffy watched as they leveled their blasters at the closest vampire, firing blue-white bolts into its chest and throwing it back. Behind them, Willow cast a handful of sparkling dust into a vampire's face, blinding it with another spell. They appeared to have everything under control, at least for the moment, allowing Buffy to concentrate on the task at hand.

>Gabriel's face was twisted in anguish now and the tears seeped in slow streams over his cheeks. Soft, stressful noises sounded under his breath, a testament to the intensity of whatever nightmare he was experiencing inside. Somehow, she had to find a way to help him.

>Reaching out, Buffy pressed her fingertips tenderly to his temples and closed her eyes. Three months ago, when she had been lost and dying in a trance, Gabriel had found a way to come to her aid using the similarity between their special natures to guide him. Hopefully, she could reach him in the same way now. Only she had no idea where to begin.

>She remembered another time, shortly before that, when Gabriel had shared his Second Sight with her by placing himself into a sort of pseudo-trance. The idea seemed as likely to work as anything else she could think of.

>Inhaling deeply, she blocked out the raucous sounds of the battle around her and let her consciousness drift. A disciplined calm came over her and her mind eased into a primeval state of receptiveness. She felt ready to reach out, but couldn't. Focusing her thoughts was not enough.

>Gabriel had used some kind of phrase, a mantra, to allow him to bridge the gap between them, she recalled. She had no idea what to

say, but she didn't think it really mattered. So she chose the words with her heart.

>"Gabriel," She whispered softly, "I love you and I'm coming to help you."

>She repeated the words with the exact same tone and pacing, stringing the sentences together into a continuous cycle.

>"Gabriel, I love you and I'm coming to help you."

>Power began to flow through her fingers, both a giving and a taking, in an equal exchange between them. She could sense a vast openness before her, familiar yet intimidating in its complexity. It was a difficult challenge to grasp the intricacies of another human mind. But she had to try.

>"Gabriel, I love you and I'm coming to help you."

>* * *

>Xander hit the floor, face first, the impact shocking the air from his lungs. Coughing, he scrambled and rolled, firing his blaster into the body of an attacking vampire. The creature snarled in pain and turned away, staggering back over a steep slope of rock.

>Oz crouched next to him, propping his weapon arm on his hip and offered out a hand to Xander, pulling him to his feet.

>"This is crazy!" the dark-haired youth gasped, pressing a palm to his sternum and wincing, "We can't do this!"

>"Don't have a choice." Oz fired on another vampire, the stun-blaster bucking against his arm as he hovered protectively in front of Willow while she prepared another spell.

>Xander took up position next to them, reinforcing the tentative barrier between the vampires and the unconscious Buffy and Gabriel. Firing on another advancing attacker, he took the brief opportunity to shoot a quick glance over his shoulder and check on them. Both were as still as stone, in the exact kneeling position they had been in for five long minutes now. He wondered worriedly if he and the others would be able to keep the vampires at bay long enough for them to waken.

>As the remaining Vessels formed a semi-circle around them, trapping them against the wall, the Master leaped atop the stone outcropping where Buffy had lain, holding the skull aloft in his hands.

>"Take them!"

>With the relentlessness of a single mind, the vampires closed on them. Xander and Oz fired their weapons as quickly as they could, but the blasts were too little, too late to stop the rush.

>The three were born to the ground, dragged down and held by impossibly strong undead hands. The vampires growled lustily, canines bared, and wrapped their limbs around the prisoners, completely immobilizing them.

>The Master hopped down and strolled confidently forward, cradling the fanged skull under his arm.

>Smiling pleasantly, the vampire lord squatted before them and clasped his hands together around the skull.

>"I can't begin to tell you how pleased I am that you'll be able to witness my moment of triumph." He sighed happily, "Once you're undead, you can tell the story to all the new children of darkness we will create."

>Xander squirmed and exchanged fearful glances with Willow and Oz before turning his eyes on the Master.

>"Sounds like a very Brady nightmare." He quipped, bravely attempting to hide the quaver in his voice, "But it's pretty big talk for someone who looked like a med-school prop this time last year."

>"Hmm," the bat-faced vampire considered, stroking his pale chin thoughtfully, "That's a good point. We'll have to continue this conversation later."

>He rose sharply and inspected the talons on the ends of his fingers with pride.

>"I have a Slayer to kill."

>* * *

>Buffy felt herself floating, lost. Everything was impossibly white, not empty, just all the same. The dizzying expansiveness of Gabriel's mind shrank and tightened in focus, until she was finally able to interpret a small section of it. There was solidity under her feet, but could not differentiate it from the flawlessly white openness around her.

>A distant, familiar voice reached her ears and she squinted into the distance, listening. Someone was out there, too far away to identify, but at least it was a point of reference. Breaking into a brisk jog, she started in a direct line for the barely-visible figure.

>Out of nowhere, a small auburn-haired boy, perhaps five years old, came running toward her with tears in his eyes and collided with her legs, stopping her cold.

>"They're coming!" the boy wailed in fright, latching onto her leg desperately and turning his face upward, fixing her with wide, gold-on-green eyes, "I can see them in the dark! I'm scared!"

>"Gabriel?" she crouched, tentatively bringing a gentle hand up to stroke the side of his cherub-like face.

>"Who're you?" the boy sniffed, wiping his eyes with a tiny fist.

>Before she could answer, another boy emerged out of the whiteness, this one older by four or five years, with jet-black hair and deep, midnight-blue eyes. Seeming unaware of Buffy, he took Gabriel around the shoulders and pulled the younger boy away from her and into a comforting hug.

>"It's alright, Gabriel." The boy soothed, "There's nothing in there that can hurt you. It's just your special sight showing you things. You'll get used to it soon."

>Buffy gaped in surprise. Although the last time she had seen him, his visage had been twisted with hatred and evil, the older boy's identity was instantly recognizable. It was Raphael, Gabriel's dead brother, only he was a decade-and-a-half younger than the man she had known.

>"Come on," the boy smiled at his younger sibling, "let's get you back in the house. Dad will have a fit if he finds you awake this late."

>Gabriel unconsciously wiped at his nose and a slight smile peeked through his tears. Raphael patted his brother on the back and took him by the hand, turning away from her and fading into the whiteness. Buffy reached out to stop them, but she was too late and they were gone.

>Turning her gaze back toward the distant figure, she found that she was closer now, enough to discern that the person was male, kneeling with his head bowed, unmoving.

>She continued to run toward him, figuring that, somehow, reaching him would provide the answer to her dilemma. A high-pitched cry of pain assaulted her ears and she skidded to a stop, whirling around swiftly. A small patch of forest had manifested out of the nothingness, a stand of lush, green trees and mossy rock against a stark, white sky. An auburn-haired boy lay curled atop one of the larger rocks, clutching his left leg and clenching his jaw in pain.

It was Gabriel again, only this time he was perhaps ten or twelve years old.

>A taller, older Raphael burst from the underbrush and crouched at his brother's side.

>"Damn, Gabriel," he smiled, shaking his head ruefully, "I told you this was too dangerous for a kid your age. Let me see your leg."

>Gabriel stiffened and pushed his brother's hands away, his face proud but pale with pain.

>"I'm not a kid." He asserted through gritted teeth, his voice cracking, "I'll be fine. I just have to walk it off."

>Raphael cautiously touched the wounded leg and Gabriel yelped, tears springing from his eyes and his breath catching in his throat. The older boy caught him around the shoulders and prudently held him still to keep him from aggravating the injury. He sat with him, allowing his brother to squeeze his hand until the worst of the pain had passed.

>"It's all right, Gabriel. You're going to be okay." He said, patting him reassuringly on the back, "But it's broken. You'll have to let Dad take you home."

>"No!" Gabriel protested, attempting to hide his tears and struggling uselessly to rise, "I promised Father I'd help you!"

>"Listen to me," Raphael gripped him by the shoulders and his face and tone became stern, "I'll take care of it. Your leg is broken. Even he wouldn't expect you to continue like this. You're still young, you'll have lots of time to prove yourself to him. Not that you should even have to."

>Gabriel didn't seem convinced, but he accepted his brother's advice. Carefully, Raphael lifted the younger boy in his arms and turned back into the forest, his brother's head resting against his shoulder. Again, the scene faded into white.

>Buffy frowned. Gabriel had told her once how he had broken his leg as a boy during the first mission he had ever undertaken for his father. She was seeing scenes from Gabriel's past, she realized, but why? The closer she got to the figure in the distance, the more recent the memories became.

>As she continued to jog, closing the distance between herself and the unknown person, the whiteness shifted again and she found herself inside a well-furnished townhouse. Gabriel was older again this time, looking only a year or two younger than his present age, his hair falling in long, loose waves down to his shoulders. He squared off with Raphael, who now appeared to be in his early twenties.

>"I'll go wherever I want to!" Gabriel shouted, his face flushed and his fists clenched, "I'm not a kid anymore. You can't tell me what to do!"

>Raphael folded his arms tightly across his chest and leaned his back against the wall, a movement Buffy had seen from Gabriel at times when he was angry or agitated.

>"No one said you were a kid, Gabriel." He replied with enforced calm, "But you're making a mistake. It's not right the way Dad's treating you."

>"He knows what's best for me." The younger boy declared, turning his back on his brother, "My training will be finished in a couple of years. Things will be better then. Then I can be with him all the time."

>Buffy's lips pursed in heartfelt sympathy. Gabriel's hope of being with his father would never come true. Six months ago, the man had betrayed Gabriel to the late Mayor Wilkins and almost cost him his life. But this Gabriel had no idea that his father was a monster and,

by the time he realized, it would be too late. The last anyone had ever seen of Peter Giles, he had been dragged across the threshold of a portal into the demon dimension.

>Gabriel spun on his heel and stormed for the door, but his brother cut him off.

>"Where are you going?" Raphael demanded.

>"Get out of my way, Raphael." He growled warningly, glaring through the long tendrils of hair hanging over his face. The older young man didn't budge, staring with resolute concern down into his sibling's eyes.

>"Gabriel—" he gripped him by the shoulder and Gabriel lashed out violently.

>"Leave me alone!" he roared, slapping Raphael's hand away and punching a palm heel into the center of his chest.

>Gabriel's fingers caught the edge of a fine, silver pendant around his brother's neck and the chain snapped. Raphael hit the wall and crumpled to the floor, gasping for air, leaving the pendant dangling from Gabriel's fingers.

>Buffy saw a flash of pained regret cross Gabriel's features as he gathered the sundered crucifix reverently into his palm, but she could tell by the anger in his eyes that he would not let it stop him. He opened the door and stepped over his brother's prone form.

>"I don't need you to take care of me anymore." He muttered down at him before stalking outside and slamming the door behind him.

>The scene blended away into the endless white, leaving Buffy confused. What had she just witnessed? And what did it mean?

>The person on the horizon was much closer now, recognizable. Gabriel knelt quietly on the plain of white, his head bowed in grief.

Murmuring quietly to himself, he seemed to be unaware of her.

>"Gabriel?" she whispered, reaching out to gently touch his shoulder.

>He started fearfully, drawing back, but his face softened the instant he recognized her. Without a word, he rushed to her and pulled her into his arms, holding tightly and breathing a sigh of utter relief that she felt throughout his entire body.

>Lowering her head against his chest, she pressed her fingers into his back and held him. Her eyes closed, she inhaled a soft breath, her body filling with deep comfort. She had missed this so much, the familiar loving touch that never failed to stir her heart.

>The muted sound of nearby footsteps interrupted her quiet reverie and she reluctantly cracked her lids. A black-haired young man in his mid-twenties approached, an intense, hateful scowl entrenched on his vampiric face, exactly as it had been when she had unintentionally destroyed him a month ago.

>"Hello Slayer." Raphael greeted her with a dark glare, stopping and folding his arms over his chest.

>Gabriel flinched violently and instantly released her, lurching back. His eyes were glued to the apparition of his brother, their depths livid with a storm of emotion. Buffy understood a lot of what she saw there. Love, fear, anger, confusion, guilt and regret. Mostly the first and the last two.

>Raphael relaxed his vampiric mask and resumed his human appearance, favoring his brother with a disdainful glance.

>"She still has you in the palm of her hand, doesn't she?" he berated

cruelly, "That's why I died, you know, because of her."

>Gabriel blinked in shock and swallowed uneasily, hurt.

>"N-no." he argued softly, "That's not true. Buffy would never-"

>"But she did, didn't she?" Raphael cut him off and turned to face Buffy, "Isn't that right?"

>Gabriel's gaze flicked back and forth between her and his brother, unsure, and Buffy's eyes narrowed angrily. Raphael sneered at her.

>"She made you hesitate, didn't she Gabriel?" he pushed, turning back to the younger man.

>Gabriel's face tensed with misery and he bowed his head again in guilt.

>"You never would have questioned your loyalty to your family before you met her." Raphael accused him, riding the young man's suffering, "You never would have questioned your loyalty to me. I died because you couldn't bring yourself to save me."

>Gabriel flinched again and Buffy stepped in front of him, instinctively protective.

>"Leave him alone." She snapped, facing off with the dark-haired young man.

>Raphael's lip curled arrogantly and Gabriel pulled her back by the shoulders, his hands trembling against her upper arms. He was scared, she understood, terrified of what might happen if the two of them came into conflict again. Unlike Buffy, Raphael callously ignored the young man's fear.

>"You failed me, Gabriel." He spat, "Just like you failed our father."

>Gabriel stopped shrinking back suddenly and straightened, scowling suspiciously.

>"What did you say?" he questioned shrewdly.

>Raphael frowned at his younger brother's unexpected reaction.

>"You couldn't save him, Gabriel." He repeated.

>Buffy laid a comforting hand on Gabriel's arm but he didn't seem to need it anymore. He took a step forward, meeting his brother's gaze steadily for the first time since the apparition had appeared. Months ago, Gabriel had gambled everything and changed time for a chance to save his father's life. But the daring action had come at too high a price and the repercussions almost destroyed the future of humanity. In the end, he had been fortunate enough to be given another chance and had no choice but to let his father die.

>"I DID save him, but it was a mistake." He maintained with surety, "I told you the story when you came to Sunnydale. Why don't you remember that?"

>Raphael shrank uncertainly and took a faltering step backward. Buffy recognized something familiar in him suddenly and advanced.

>"Because he's not your brother, Gabriel." She surmised aloud, cocking her head toward the man, "Are you?"

>Raphael's face twisted into a savage snarl and he threw his hands into the air with an enraged roar. His features melded and shifted color, changing until they formed the pale and hairless visage of the Master.

>"Well done, Slayer." He congratulated sourly, "You may have rescued your fool Seventh Son, but you've doomed yourself."

>Lunging forward, he pounded his fist into Gabriel's face, dropping the young man instantly, and dove for Buffy. But he stopped short,

freezing cautiously when he saw her.

>Unlike Gabriel, Buffy had been prepared for an attack and she had not forgotten the hard lesson she had learned during her last conscious trip into the dream world. Spreading her arms, she delved into her inner self and grew to twice her normal size, her body flaring with blinding yellow light. When the brightness faded, she stood towering over the Master, her body a graceful woman shape entirely composed of intense golden flames.

>"You were saying?" Fire-Buffy chuckled wryly.

>The Master backed down gracefully, without a trace of the rage he had shown earlier.

>"You've already lost, Slayer." He informed her confidently, "What you see before you is only a seeming of the spell I cast. While your attention is focused solely here, mine is not. You'll never get back to the conscious world in time to stop me from killing you."

>Tilting his head back, he roared with mad laughter and faded away.

>* * *

>Xander strained with all his strength against the vampire holding him pinned against the ground, but his effort proved ineffectual at best. A normal vampire could overpower him without much effort, to these super-creatures he wasn't even an annoyance.

>He could only watch helplessly as the Master walked past him, focusing his attention entirely on Buffy's still form.

>"Such a pretty thing, don't you think?" he commented rhetorically to Xander who was the only one of the three prisoners who could turn his head enough to face him.

>"L-Leave her a-alone." He gasped, his ribcage squeezed in the grip of his vampire captor.

>The Master closed a taloned hand around Buffy's soft throat and looked over his shoulder at the young man.

>"Or what?" he sneered, "Who's going to stop me? You?"

>Behind him, Gabriel's eyes snapped open and blinked once. Quickly gathering his wits, he jumped to his feet and grabbed hold of the Master's shoulder, spinning him around.

>"We all will." He gritted his teeth and threw every ounce of strength he had into a punch to the vampire's jaw.

>The Master's head snapped back and he flew off the low stone ledge with a roar of pain and outrage. His body thumped against the cavern floor and the skull tumbled out of his grasp.

>Grabbing up one of the stakes he had lost earlier, Gabriel raised it in a two-handed grip and smashed it into the back of the vampire holding Xander, directly over the creature's heart. The vampire roared and burst into a cloud of dust, freeing its prisoner.

>The other two released Willow and Oz, scrambling to their feet and rushing the Seventh Son with outstretched hands. He danced nimbly out of their reach, turning and leaping onto the Master's back as the vampire lord regained his feet.

>* * *

>As Xander and Oz reclaimed their stolen Initiative blasters and started firing on the remaining Vessels, Willow scanned the cavern for a weapon, anything she could use to help in the fight. Her eyes fell on a jagged wooden stake and she reached out with her witch power, levitating it toward her waiting hand. As the wood left the floor, another vampire, a brutish, long-haired fiend, bounded up before her. With a scream of terror, she dropped to the ground and covered her head with her hands. Reacting to her fear and the surge of adrenaline that coursed through her system, the stake shot forth,

streaking for her hand. The vampire unknowingly stepped directly into its path and shrieked as the stake buried itself in his back, piercing the heart.

>She fell back, weak with fear, leaning heavily on Oz's shoulder as the creature burst into a cloud of ash. He wrapped one arm around her, using the other to aim his stun-gun and fire at another vampire while backing toward higher ground.

>There were still three Vessels left, she counted, all of them as powerful and hate-filled as the Master himself. She and her friends didn't stand a chance against such overwhelming odds. She needed to find a way to change those odds.

>Something had to be channeling the Master's power into his minions, magic of that caliber was near impossible to pull off on the scale to which he had accomplished without a conduit. But what could it be?

>Oz and Xander crowded against her in a protective wall, firing almost continuously with their blasters to hold off the encroaching creatures. They were at a nerve-wracking standstill, the efforts of the two young men sufficient to keep the vampires at bay, but not enough to do any lasting damage.

>If she could find the conduit, maybe she could break the connection and rob the Vessels of their power. Taking advantage of the relative safety Oz and Xander were providing, she closed her eyes and opened her senses to the magical emanations in the area. If the conduit was nearby, she would find it.

>* * *

>The vampire lord spun around and threw Gabriel easily off his back, raising a foot to stomp on him. The young man rolled desperately, narrowly avoiding the attack, and spun into a sharp footsweep. The Master deftly blocked the move with the outside edge of his boot and kicked him with the other foot. The Seventh Son absorbed the majority of the strike's force with arms crossed over his chest, but he was weak, getting tired, and he tumbled backward.

>"Fool." The vampire lord spat scornfully, "You're no match for me. My Vessels have empowered me. Soon I will be at my peak."

>Gabriel climbed to his feet, undaunted, more than willing to continue fighting.

>"And then what?" he circled cautiously, hands open and ready for an attack, "Full tank of gas isn't going to be much use to a broken car, if you get my meaning."

>He lunged, striking out with swift hands, but the Master grabbed him around the chest, jerking him into a lung-jarring clinch and throwing him to the ground. Gabriel bounced against the cold stone once and then sat up, holding his ribs.

>The vampire chuckled derisively down at him, "What use is power if not to gather more power?" He cast a sidelong glance to the gaping fissure that was the Hellmouth, "I intend to become a god."

>Gabriel moistened his lips anxiously and mentally judged the distance between himself and the Master, then from the Master to the Hellmouth. One quick move and he could end the threat of the Master forever. He was afraid, but saw no other choice. He just had to be strong.

>Crouching, he tamped his feet against the rough rock floor and sprang, arms outstretched. His shoulder collided with the ancient vampire's mid-section and he locked his arms around his opponent, driving with his legs in the direction of the fissure.

>Gritting his teeth, he fought the Master's attempts to dislodge him,

pushing with all his strength for the Hellmouth. Just a few more feet and he would reach the precipice and then it would be over. A few more feet.

>The Master brought a doubled fist down between Gabriel's shoulder blades, at the same point where the commando had struck him. The blow sent a shock through his system and he crumpled weakly to his knees. Laughing disdainfully, the Master shoved him close to the edge and the young man's body flopped limply, one arm dangling over.

>As Gabriel hung inches from certain death, Buffy topped a small outcropping of rock, hefting the Master's skull in one hand like a baseball.

>"Hold it right there, Pinkface." She commanded, "Naptime's over and I'm back in the game."

>The bald vampire's jaw fell open, his eyes fastened to the skull in her hand. Hauling Gabriel up by one arm, he clasped him in a steely grip and pressed a sharp thumb talon against his jugular.

>"What are you doing with that?" he advanced menacingly, dragging Gabriel's struggling form along with him, "Give it back or the boy dies!"

>Atop the landing, Xander and Oz dropped an enhanced vampire with twin blasts of stunning electricity and rushed to the lip worriedly.

>Buffy faced off with her old nemesis hesitantly, afraid to put Gabriel's life in further danger.

>"So what will it be, Slayer?" he demanded, giving Gabriel's neck a warning wrench, "My skull? Or his life?"

>Behind them, Willow's eyes snapped open and her face lit up with understanding.

>"Buffy, the skull!" she called, "That's what's anchoring the Master in the living world!"

>The Slayer turned a wry and triumphant smile on her enemy, switching her grip on the skull and hooking her fingers through the eyeholes.

>"You want it?" she challenged with raised eyebrows, "Come and get it."

>She jerked her arm back as if to throw the skull and the Master panicked, reaching desperately to stop her and loosing his grip on Gabriel. The Seventh Son spun around, grabbing the vampire's arms and pulling them back roughly into a rigid joint lock. At the same time, Buffy jumped forward and smashed the skull into the Master's face, shattering it into a hundred tiny fragments.

>The ancient vampire screamed deafeningly and clutched his face, falling to his knees as Gabriel released him. A chill, powerful gale arose, surrounding his body with a column of otherworldly wind and throwing small objects around the subterranean chamber.

>Buffy and Gabriel ran to one another and took the landing together, simultaneously staking a pair of vampires. Their connection to the Master severed, the beasts died easily and the last of their brethren turned and fled from the cavern. As Slayer and Seventh Son safely reached their friends, they looked back and squinted into the buffeting gale at the Master's plight.

>"Nooooo!!!!" the vampire lord wailed, sweeping his arms blindly through the air as if battling with some strange, invisible force.

>His body jerked and his back arched, rigid with strain, every limb shuddering violently. Angry, red energy began to emanate from the Master's body as he was purged of the Hellmouth's power, wafting like ethereal tendrils of smoke and streaming into the crack in the floor.

>"Rrrraahhhh!! No!!" the wind tightened around him, lifting him up to his tiptoes and pinning his arms to his sides, "I! Am! The! Masterrrrr!!"

>The roaring of the storm rose to a tempestuous crescendo, becoming a piercing shriek that resonated off the raw stone walls. As the supernatural storm peaked and the sound became unbearable, it abruptly ceased, plunging the cavern into still, eerie silence and dropping the Master's lifeless body to the ground.

>Willow peered down at the still form, wide-eyed and nervous.

>"Do you . . . Do you think he's . . . dead?"

>Oz, Xander and Buffy dropped down to the lower level and approached cautiously, the boys with stun-guns at the ready.

>"Looks like it." She answered, nudging the body with her toe.

>Gabriel stepped up behind her and put his hands reassuringly on her shoulders.

>"Then leave him." He decided, "He deserves to stay here."

>The group filed out of the cavern in pairs, nursing minor wounds and dragging tired limbs. Xander slung his stun blaster over his shoulder and took up the rear, breathing a relieved sigh.

>"I'm starting to get pretty good at this saving-the-world stuff." He considered aloud, "Hey Buffy, ask Gabriel who saved his butt from the Initiative tonight."

>The blonde smirked over her shoulder and arched an impressed eyebrow, "All those childhood games of Cowboys and Indians finally paid off, huh?"

>"Maybe I should join the police academy or something." He observed humorously, noisily clearing his throat and staring expectantly at Gabriel, "At least then I might actually get a 'thank you'."

>The Seventh Son paused as he hooked his hands together into a stirrup and helped Willow up onto a ledge.

>"After I took out the Vessel that had you and Anya cornered, I think we should be even, don't you?" he cocked his head in bemused query.

>Xander shrugged the statement off and rolled his eyes with a dismissive snort.

>"Oh, come on, you do that kind of stuff all the time." He argued, proudly puffing out his chest and thumping it lightly with his fist, "My life was really on the line out there. I'm a hero."

>"Aren't heroes supposed to be modest?" Willow mentioned from atop the ledge.

>Buffy and Xander looked to one another and she stooped slightly, slingng her hands together the same way Gabriel had.

>"You don't honestly think I'm going up ahead of you in this outfit, do you?" she regarded him archly.

>He shrugged sheepishly and placed a steadyng hand on her shoulder before stepping into her grip and bouncing up to the ledge. Once there, he turned on his knees and offered his hand down.

>After boosting Buffy up, Gabriel reached for Xander's help. The dark-haired young man pulled back and grinned.

>"Still haven't heard any thank you." He reminded Gabriel with a chuckle.

>Gabriel glared at him with friendly ire.

>"Alright Xander," he surrendered grudgingly, "Thank. You."

>"Now that's better." Xander nodded with a self-satisfied smile, allowing the Seventh Son to take his hand, "It's about time you-OW! Gotta watch the grip there, buddy."

>Gabriel stood on the lip of the escarpment, dusting himself off and smirked a thin apology.

>"Sorry about that, hero."

>* * *

>Parker crawled out of the dusty, filthy air duct and brushed off his costume, finally willing to chance venturing into the open. When the first of the feral creatures had attacked, he had crawled into the duct, pulled the screen in behind him, and remained perfectly silent for almost an hour.

>Petrified with terror, he had watched as dozens of UC Sunnydale students fell prey to the unstoppable vampires, tortured and mutilated before his eyes. He had even known a few of them, but Parker's first concern was for his own life and he wouldn't dare reveal himself.

>After a while, the chaos had subsided and the majority of the vampires had disappeared, leaving behind a scattering of frightened and confused students. Like him, most of the remaining survivors had hidden away and were only now reemerging.

>What a rotten night he was having. And it had all started out so well. The Summers chick had been just about ready to give it up, everything had been going just like he'd planned. Then it had gone to hell. He couldn't imagine a worse ending for his evening. On top of everything else that had happened, he was condemned to go back to his dorm room, and more specifically his bed, alone.

>As he exited the auditorium, he raised his eyebrows at the figure of a young blonde girl and a conniving leer bent his lips. Or would he?

>The girl sat on the edge of the curb, muttering and sobbing quietly to herself into the folds of her voluminous, pink dress.

>"Hey." He greeted, seating himself next to her, "Pretty wild night, huh? You okay?"

>She lifted her tear-stained face slowly and looked at him. She was a pretty thing, with faint make-up smudges under her eyes and a smeared mark of some sort in the center of her forehead. Her blue eyes looked lost and vulnerable, just the way Parker liked them.

>"I'm Parker." He introduced himself, offering out his hand.

>"Hi." She accepted it slowly, sniffing back the last of her tears.

>"You're not all alone out here, are you?" he asked, applying just the right amount of concern to his voice.

>"What?" she frowned slightly at him, appearing mildly confused, "I guess so, yeah."

>Parker kept a straight face, his blue eyes giving the only evidence of the smile he felt inside. All alone, he marveled silently, and probably pretty scared and lonely at this point.

>"You need someone to walk you home?"

>The request was not something he usually tried right off the bat, but the girl wasn't going to get any more susceptible to his approach than she was right now without a significant time investment. He had to strike while the iron was hot.

>"You want to take me home?" she raised her eyebrows and wrinkled her forehead in puzzlement.

>"Well . . ." he paused purposely so that his answer wouldn't seem planned, "Yeah."

>She tilted her head in apparent thought and Parker's confidence grew. She obviously wasn't a mental giant. All the better for him.

>"No." she answered at last, "I don't want to."

>Parker swore silently to himself as he saw his plan crumbling into dust.

>"No." the girl continued, "Let's go to your place instead."

>His spirits soared anew, bolstered by this virtual guarantee of success. Smiling broadly, he slipped his arm around her shoulders and started for Kreskie Hall.

>"So, pretty lady," he mentioned with unctuous charm, "you never told me your name."

>Like I even care, he snickered silently.

>"Harmony." She purred, snuggling close under his arm and smiling warmly.

>Parker smiled to himself, wondering absently how he could get rid of her before morning.

>Harmony placed her small hand in his and peered coyly up at him.

>"Do you think we could stop for a bite on the way?"

>* * *

>Buffy curled against Gabriel's chest, standing on the veranda at his apartment. Both were adorned with minor scratches and bruises from the battle, but it didn't matter. They clung to one another, impossibly safe within the perimeter of their own personal world, the warm intimate melding of their particular natures enveloping them with soothing comfort.

>"I wish you could have known him." Gabriel whispered softly, stroking his fingers through the soft, blonde hair on the side of her head, "I mean the way he used to be. Before Cairo."

>She smiled and squeezed her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek against his chest.

>"I did." She revealed quietly, "I saw him in your dream. Looks like he was a really great guy."

>"He was." He enfolded her in his arms, cradling her against his chest, and sighed wistfully, "Raphael was the only one who never wanted anything from me. He didn't care about what I could do, or what I could see. All that mattered was that I was his brother."

>Sliding open the glass door, he guided her inside, away from the cool night air. Pausing by a cluttered end table, he reached out and ran his fingers along the edge of a pewter pictureframe containing a photograph of himself that had been a gift from his brother before they left Thailand and went their separate ways.

>"No one else ever loved me that honestly, not my father, not anyone." He took her head in his hands tenderly, like he was holding a priceless treasure, "Until now."

>He let his arms drop down around her waist and reached behind her with one hand, pulling open the shallow drawer of an endtable and withdrawing a rectangular, palm-sized box. With a faint creak, he opened it, revealing a silver crucifix on a fine-linked chain. A tiny kink marked one section of the chain, an almost imperceptible indication that it had been broken and later repaired. She recognized it immediately as the pendant she had seen in Gabriel's dream.

>"I gave this to my brother in Czechoslovakia. But I've been holding on to it for a long time. I want you to have it." He said in a tight, whispering voice, draping the pendant around her slender neck and hooking the clasp against her nape, "So it can protect you the way it

should have protected him."

>Buffy's breath caught in her throat and an exhilarating rush of euphoria rose within her as she lifted the sharp-edged icon in her palm and laid her head against his chest. She never thought she would ever feel this much love again.

>But it was very late and she had an early class in the morning. God, she hated school. Slowly, regretfully, she raised her head and put a fraction of an inch between them.

>"I should go home now." She whispered, stroking his face with her fingers and kissing him softly, again and again, across his cheeks, his chin, his lips. The tingling of their intermingling energies surged tantalizingly strong.

>"No, please." He protested, taking her by the hands and holding her eyes to his, "I just got you back. I can't let you go yet. Not yet. Stay with me a little longer. Just ten more minutes and then you can go. But not yet."

>His voice trembled with intensity, his eyes vibrant with feeling, and she could feel his heart thundering in his chest. Buffy slowly traced her fingers over his face, memorizing his familiar features with her soft hands. The tingling redoubled, maddening in its strength, an undeniable sweet torment against the front of her body. She was beyond speech, choked by joyous emotion. Leaning into his chest, she pushed against him, guiding back him toward his bedroom.

>"Buffy . . . ?" he breathed her name and looked at her uncertainly, stroking her hair as he stepped unsteadily backward.

>"Ssshh . . ." she pressed a warm finger to his lips, shoving open the door with her toe and striding over the mess of dirty laundry on the floor, her face and mouth pressed against the heat of his neck, "I'm staying."

>He sat back on the bed and looked up at her admiringly.

>"You're crying." he gasped quietly, reaching up in concern and wiping the stray tears from her cheeks with his thumbs.

>The gentle touch left a trail of tickling heat across the surface of her face. She could feel his energy all around her now, melding with her own and surrounding her like a warm, comforting aura.

>"So are you." She smiled through her tears, sniffing as she urged him back and lowered herself gently down on top of him, "Why?"

>"I don't know." He smiled back, quickly wiping the corners of his eyes and reaching out to lovingly stroke the contour of her face.

>"Neither do I." She kissed him deeply with raw, untapped emotion, hooking her arms around his neck and allowing her body to melt against his.

>Frantically tugging off their disheveled costumes, they clung eagerly to one another and climbed blindly under the white bedsheets together. The intermingling of their energies increased tenfold and every nerve in Buffy's body became suffused with rapture. It had never been this powerful before, the electrifying tingle coursing throughout her in dizzying waves, leaving her light-headed.

>As Gabriel drew his face up along her neck and kissed her hungrily, the sensation surged again, stronger this time, and she moaned in delight. The wave of ecstasy receded and Buffy's vision blurred suddenly for an instant, becoming instantly deeper and more intricate than human eyes were meant to see. She gaped, stunned by the beauty of it.

>The Second Sight. For the moment it was a part of her, fused to her

being by Gabriel's love and desire. She could see so much as a result of the intimate gift, like everything around her had been blessed with a wondrous new dimension. The sensation was incredible, more wonderful than anything she could have ever imagined. She gasped softly as Gabriel pressed down on top of her and twined the fingers of one hand through hers, kissing her softly. A breathtakingly beautiful aura of gold and green light rays surrounded him as he smiled lovingly and held her gaze with exhilarating intensity. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled herself tight against his body and sighed deeply. She wanted to look at him all night.

>In the morning, Buffy stirred and smiled drowsily to herself, inhaling deeply with her eyes closed. Birds chirped gaily outside Gabriel's bedroom window and pale rays of morning light streamed through the drapes, announcing the maturing dawn. She stretched and sighed, reveling in how warm and incredibly soft the bedsheets felt against her skin. The silver crucifix pendant dangled over her shoulder, the chain piled loosely on the bed. Even throughout the vigorous physicality of the night, she hadn't removed it, she planned to never have to.

>Her body drew in every sensation, cataloging it, savoring it, memorizing it. Every nerve ending in her body seemed charged with residual hyper-sensitivity from the dream-like events of the previous night. She felt like she was glowing all over, safe and calm and loved. She slid her hand palm-down along the plush cotton sheets, questing for the source of that warmth and love, until her fingers slipped over the edge of the mattress, finding nothing.

>Her eyes snapped open and panic gripped her as she jerked bolt upright, clutching the sheets to her body with her hand closed over the pendant. Her breath came in short, harsh gasps and her heart was pounding a mile a minute. He was gone. Gabriel was gone. Last night, she had finally gotten him back, her life had seemed complete again. And now he was gone. Just like Angel. For the second time, the love of her life had disappeared, abandoning her after a first night of passion.

>The door eased open and Gabriel stepped inside, clad only in a pair of boxer shorts, his arms filled with various food items.

>"There's not much in the fridge," He mentioned around a package of cheese pinned between his teeth, pointing awkwardly to four browned slices of bread on one of the plates balanced in his hands, "but I made some toast."

>His face fell as he looked up and saw the terror in her eyes. Dropping everything to the floor with a clatter, he rushed to sit next to her, grabbing her and pulling her into his arms. Buffy sobbed in relief, rocking in the safety of his embrace, tears wetting her cheeks.

>"I-I'm-I'm so glad." She gasped chokingly, clinging tightly to his chest.

>"I didn't know toast was so important to you." he joked softly with a loving smile, stroking her hair and kissing her head gently.

>"Be quiet." She smiled, the baseless fear receding as quickly as it had come, banished by his caring presence, "And get back in bed."

>"Hmm, I was hoping you'd skip morning classes today." He slipped under the covers next to her and cradled her against him, her head resting on his chest.

>"Good," she rolled over on top of him to face him, folding her fingers together palms-down on his chest under her chin, "then you

won't mind calling off work, too."

>He smiled, enfolding her in his arms, and allowed his eyes to sag shut contentedly.

>Buffy lay quietly within the protection of his embrace, her ear pressed against his chest, listening to the steady thrumming of his heart and the susurrus song of the blood in his veins. It was like that blood was hers now too, and the heart fed them both as one complete being. They lay in comfortable silence for a while before she lifted her head and spoke.

>"Do you think he's really gone?" she asked softly, tracing light, careless circles on the skin of his chest with the edge of her new pendant.

>Gabriel inhaled slow and deep. He didn't have to ask who she was referring to.

>"The Master won't be coming back." He assured her, stroking his hands over her bare shoulders, "There's nothing left of him. And even if there was, the ritual to raise him died with Michael Czajak."

>"I feel sorry for what happened to Michael." She sighed, clasping one of his hands and holding it in both of hers, "He was never evil, just lost, you know."

>"We all choose our paths." Gabriel nodded thoughtfully, adding his other hand to the outside of hers, his mind combing over the last few years of his own life, "And it's never too late to choose a new one. He just chose wrong."

>Buffy sighed contentedly and closed her eyes as Gabriel continued to hold her, silent and comforting, until they both drifted off to sleep.

>* * *

>Michael felt his body rock limply as the soft, flat surface underneath him hit a bump. He was being moved, he realized distantly, carted along by some unknown force on a gurney. There was more than one of them, he could tell by the murky, underwater sounds of their voices, but he couldn't open his eyes to see them.

>It had been this way ever since he had dared to challenge the Master for control. Dark and powerless. His mind had been stretched to incredible capacity by the Master's consciousness, but the ancient vampire was gone, as if Michael had dreamed the whole thing. But it hadn't been a dream, he could still feel the unnatural changes that had been wrought on his body, he remembered the presence within him perfectly. Centuries of the vampire's incredible knowledge remained, but no trace of the being who had once possessed it. Gone. Michael was alone. These new voices were all he had now, the only thing echoing in the emptiness inside his head.

>Experimentally, he attempted to move his arm, but failed. Perhaps something easier then, a finger or, better yet, a toe. He tried, carefully at first, then harder until the effort exhausted his mental reserve and he was forced to surrender. Nothing. All the power that had once flowed through him and he couldn't even twitch his toe.

>His journey continued for what seemed like forever. Or perhaps it was no time at all. He couldn't tell anymore. His companions, the voices who were like friends now, stopped with him in a place that felt familiar yet strange. The feeling was reminiscent of an old enemy he only vaguely remembered. The floor dropped slowly, carrying them down deep into the earth. He wanted to shudder. Michael didn't like being underground. For too long he had been trapped there, powerless, like he was now. Or had that been someone else?

>The descent stopped with cushioned abruptness and he was wheeled

out. There were periods of light and shadow passing over his eyes and he understood that he was in a long corridor with overhead lights positioned at regular intervals. Flash, dark, flash, dark, the sequence went, marking time like the splashes of a water clock. The procession paused and he heard the faint, musical process of a code being punched into an electronic keypad. A soft hiss as another door opened and he was brought through. Two more pauses and two more doors and he was near the heart of their operation. He knew it well. The ones who used to study him in his captivity had always reeked of this place.

>"Bring the gurney over here." A man's voice, a new voice, ordered and he felt himself being positioned according to those wishes.

>They're going to help me! He would have jumped for joy if he had been capable. A warm thumb pried his left eye open and a dark-haired man dressed in the white lab coat of a doctor shined a bright pen light into it. Thank God, I can see, he thought. The man repeated the procedure with his right eye and when he was finished, Michael's eyelids remained open, staring blankly at the plain, white ceiling.

>"No pupil response, lack of pain reception, but neural potential is right off the charts." the doctor announced, "This one's a keeper."

>The doctor turned away, out of his limited line of sight, and addressed someone else he couldn't see.

>"You have the blood sample obtained by agent Finn?" he asked in a guarded, business-like tone.

>They're going to give me a blood transfusion? Blood was good, he recalled, liquid life, hot and sweet, a sheer pleasure for all his senses. Yes, blood would be a good idea.

>An arm with a khaki-green sleeve reached over him and passed a plastic bag to the doctor. Inside was a moist cloth, saturated with dark crimson. Michael didn't understand. How was this supposed to help him?

>"Excellent," the doctor handed the bag off to someone else, "Hand me that bonesaw, then start synthesizing the sample while I get started here."

>Michael heard a metal apparatus being assembled by the assistant while the doctor leaned over him, holding his head still and drawing a dotted line across his forehead with a marker.

>"Bring Adam's table closer." He muttered over his shoulder, "The transfer will have to be made as quickly as possible."

>Adam? Who's Adam? And what transfer?

>The doctor smiled and raised a glinting surgical saw in his hand, filling the room with an ear-tickling whine as the blade buzzed to life.

>"Adam's body is complete." He announced proudly, "Now all he needs is a brain."

>What?! Michael fought with every ounce of his being to move, to blink, to show them some sign that he was conscious. But his body seemed completely detached from the screaming commands his brain was trying to send.

>Wait! No! The shining blade hovered over him, cutting the bright overhead light with its diamond-keen edge and blinding his sensitive eyes. He wanted to scream, but no sound left his throat, he couldn't even make himself breathe.

>No, not like this. It's not supposed to end like this! Stop, I'm still alive! He screamed silently, endlessly as the saw came down.

I'M STILL ALIVE!!

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AUTHOR'S MISSIVE
>
If you've made it this far, let me say congratulations. If you've made it this far without having read the rest of the Seventh Son Series, I am in awe. For those of you who may be interested in the rest of the series and/or may have missed a piece or two of it, below is a list of the stories with short descriptions.
>

>
DIVERGENT PATHS - Coinciding with the discovery of an artifact with the power to close the Hellmouth, a mysterious stranger arrives in Sunnydale with abilities that rival the Slayer's. Will he be a powerful ally for her, or bring about her downfall?
>
TO HELL WITH TOMORROW - Thirty-five years into the future and Slaying has taken on a whole new scope. Gabriel Giles attempts to cheat death and learns that things happen for a reason.
>
BAD BLOOD - A familiar face comes to LA, forcing Angel to confront both a violent killer and his lingering feelings for Buffy.

>
RETURNS - Spike and Drusilla return to Sunnydale over the summer, but they aren't the only familiar faces turning up. Planning to steal the powers of the Slayer and Seventh Son, they cast a dark shadow over the reuniting Chosen Ones.
>
POOR MISS EDITH - Before coming to Sunnydale, Spike and Drusilla lived in Prague, Czechoslovakia and battled with a young Gabriel Giles.
>
REDEEMED - Five months after 'The Wish', a new Slayer arrives in Sunnydale to aid the Whitehats and faces off with a very different Seventh Son.
>
BOY'S NIGHT OUT - While the girls have a night to themselves, the boys go looking for fun and run afoul of a demon with a taste for young men.
>
HISTORY - Threatened by the possible return of the Master, Buffy is forced into a hard choice between love and duty.
>
FACING FEARS - Buffy's been dumped and three different men plan to take advantage, Riley, Parker and the newly-reborn Master. Meanwhile, Gabriel is targeted by the Initiative.
>
A DAY IN THE LIFE - When Buffy and Gabriel get turned into children, Willow and Xander must assume the roles of Slayer and Seventh Son. But which is the greater problem, Sunnydale's vampire population or two rambunctious toddlers on the loose?
>

>Also, I would like to apologize for condemning Spike to a simple cameo, especially since it has irritated me how the real writers have done the same thing to him. I have a sequel of sorts planned and I promise, he will have a much larger role.

>Here's a teaser. Please keep in mind that if I do decide to go ahead with the story, it may end up being very different from this summary.

>Gabriel and Spike are both captured by the Initiative and must overcome their personal dislike for one another and work together to escape. In the attack, Giles is seriously injured and put into intensive care, leaving the team without guidance. Meanwhile, Buffy is put to the test battling Harmony and Parker, Sunnydale's newest vampire couple, as well as a slew of Initiative soldiers who are under the influence of a strength-enhancing drug. Hard-pressed, she calls for help from the only one she can think to turn to. Angel.

End
file.